

Writer's Tips from Professor Gair

Writing About Literature

Use this for LIT 2174 and LIT 2955 Literature Response Papers

All papers are to be Times New Roman, 12 point font, double spaced with a one inch margin on all four sides.

Objective

In this lesson, you'll learn how to read a literary piece closely, to identify some literary elements, and to write an academic essay about a literary work. At the end of studying this handout you should have an idea of the variety of ways you will need to think about and react to the weekly literature readings in your **IMAGES FROM THE HOLOCAUST** anthology. Keep this handout next to you when you write your responses. Since the responses will be for multiple readings you must be concise and to the point. Each piece of literature in the course will require a single paragraph (1) reaction in the following form:

Title of Piece

Page number in Images....

Write a one paragraph reaction incorporating some of the tips in this handout that are relevant to that particular piece. Choose the most dominant features since you will be limiting the length to a paragraph. You will not be able to incorporate all these tips in each...choose wisely.

SKIP A LINE

REPEAT THE ABOVE PATTERN FOR EACH PIECE OF LITERATURE ASSIGNED.

Thinking about Literature

Being able to write about a work of literature such as a novel, short story, or poem is the key to success in many college English courses. Before you can write about a work of literature, you must learn to read it well and to analyze it.

1. Close reading:

- It is best to read a piece of literature at least twice. The first time you read it, focus on the story or idea being presented.

- The second time you read it, think about the characters' development and the author's writing techniques.
2. Highlight important passages in the text and take good notes to help you remember what you read.
3. You might be asked to write about the piece of literature in several ways:
- **Explication:** Most often used with poetry but sometimes with prose or drama, explication is a detailed, line-by-line, explanation of a passage. This type of essay requires close attention to language: e.g., special meanings of words, figurative language, irony, symbolism, rhythm, sound, and irony.
 - **Analysis:** Whereas an explication will examine certain passages in great depth, an analysis usually looks only at one element of a piece of literature, such as plot or character development, and then relates that element to the entire work.
 - **Comparison and Contrast:** Sometimes you will be asked to write about more than one work. In this case, usually you will write about the similarities or differences within and between works. So, you might be comparing two poems about the same theme by different authors or contrasting the plots of two different stories by one author.

Some Elements for Understanding Literature

- **Author:** Who is the author? What kind of person is s/he? Reading a brief biographical sketch of the author will give you valuable insight. Was the author male or female? Rich or poor? A member of a minority group in society? Understanding the author can help you to understand his/her writing better.
- **Historical Context:** What was life like when the author wrote the piece? For example, consider Mark Twain's book *Tom Sawyer*. American society in Twain's day was divided over the issue of slavery and racial relations. On the surface, Tom Sawyer is about two boys who take a boat ride on the Mississippi River. However, understanding the racial concerns of Twain's day suggests that a major theme of the book is his opposition to racism in America.
- **Structure:** While reading through the work, look at the plot or main point. Does it have a definite beginning, middle, and end? What is the major conflict? Which characters are most important? Are there any subplots (that is, secondary stories about minor characters)?
- **Literary Techniques:** Different writers use different literary techniques. Usually, the writer chooses a specific technique in order to bring important themes to the reader's attention. Look for the following literary techniques as you read a work:
 - **Irony** - Irony is an implied discrepancy between what is said and what is meant. There are three kinds of irony commonly found in literary works:

1. *Verbal irony* is when an author says one thing and means something else. Saying, "That's great" when someone has made a mistake is verbal irony.
 2. *Dramatic irony* is when an audience perceives something that a character in the literature does not know. If the reader already knows that a character in a story has a fatal illness, but the character does not know this and says, "I feel fine: never felt better," the statement shows dramatic irony.
 3. *Irony of situation* is a discrepancy between the expected result and actual results. In the famous "Road Runner" cartoons, the coyote always comes up with new schemes to catch the Road Runner, but none of them ever work. Even though the viewer knows he will fail, the coyote is always surprised and disappointed: this is an example of irony of situation.
- Foreshadowing - Authors foreshadow with hints or suggestions of things to come. For example, if a character drops a vase and it shatters on the floor, and a few scenes later the character's husband says he is divorcing her, then the breaking of the vase foreshadows the breaking of the marriage. Often it's easier to see foreshadowing after a second reading of the work.
 - Metaphor - A type of figurative language, metaphor is using a quality or an attribute of a thing or person to describe the thing or person itself. For example, saying that the tennis star Andre Agassi is "on fire" doesn't really mean that he's really on fire. Rather, the metaphor emphasizes how well Agassi is playing at that moment.
 - Symbolism - Authors use images to stand for moods or ideas. One of the most common examples of symbolism is the use of color to suggest the qualities or personality of a character. For example, a character dressed all in black is likely to be a villain, since the color black symbolizes evil or bad intentions. Think of Darth Vader in the movie Star Wars and you'll get the idea!
 - Imagery - Imagery is language that calls to mind one or more of the five senses: sight, taste, smell, hearing, or touch. The phrase "Her lips tasted like wine," for example, uses the sensation of taste to describe a quality of a person.
 - Rhythm and sound - In poetry, words are either stressed or unstressed, making the poem sound choppy, smooth, fast, or slow. Many examples of rhythm and sound can be found in a nursery rhyme: Little Boy Blue / come blow your horn / the cow's in the meadow / the sheep's in the corn. Read these lines aloud and hear the stressed syllables, which form the rhythm, or beat, of the rhyme.
- Author's Style - Every author has a personal writing style. Style can include the author's repeated use of certain literary techniques, the use of regional dialects or patterns of speech, the use of special words, the conscious choice of subject matter, or even deliberate errors in grammar. Style is a set of traits that make an author's writing recognizable as uniquely his or hers—a kind of literary fingerprint. If you read many works by one author, you may begin to recognize his or her unique style.

- Setting - Setting is the place and time in which a story or poem takes place. While reading, take note of how the setting factors in the work's outcome. As you read, think about how the story might be different if the setting were altered.
- Mood and Tone - *Mood* is an emotional effect created by the author. For example, in a horror novel, the author will use bleak images and cramped or claustrophobic settings to create a mood of fear. *Tone* is the author's attitude toward the subject. A writer may present ideas in a serious, sad, loving, nostalgic, critical, or comical tone.
- Character Development - Knowing the characters in a story is very important. Since all action takes place through the characters, it's necessary to understand each character's role in the development of the plot and the character's reason for existence.
- Theme - Theme is the general idea or insight the author is trying to express. To return to Mark Twain's *Tom Sawyer*, many readers believe that the novel's theme is that racism is evil.

There are many other kinds of literary elements that you can address in a paper about literature. Your professor will have a list and your textbook may have them in a glossary. Other issues that you can think about regarding literary works are:

- What is the author trying to say? Is it important?
- What are the author's values or beliefs? What does s/he think about life, humans, nature, God, or culture?
- What is your response to the work as art?
- What is your reaction to the ideas in the work? Are they truthful or relevant?

Guidelines for Writing About Literature

Now that you've analyzed the work carefully, you're ready to write. Writing about literary works is a special kind of academic essay. The following guidelines are helpful when writing about a novel, story, or poem:

- Finding Meaning: For most literature classes, your professor will ask you to explicate, analyze, or compare/contrast the work. Closely read the piece of literature. Review your notes on the work and identify the elements that you found most interesting or significant.
- Develop a Thesis: The thesis is a one- or two-sentence statement that introduces the key point or idea of your paper. In a literature paper, try to develop a thesis based upon the most striking element of a work. Make sure that you're able to support your thesis with examples and evidence from the literary work.
- Organization: Your thesis will provide you with general guidance on organization. If you are going to compare two poems, then you can look at each poem separately, requiring a "block" type of organization, or you can look at all of the similar elements in the poem, requiring a "switch" type of organization. There are other strategies for organizing a

literature paper. One strategy is a "chronological" approach, where you examine the literary elements in the order in which they appear in the story. Another strategy is a "topical" method, where you explicate or analyze according to such elements as the author's use of metaphor, symbolism, or theme.

- **Provide Details:** When you're writing about literature, include detailed examples to illustrate your points. Make your points clear by showing dialogue, explaining imagery, and using significant quotations or paraphrases of passages. When you write about literature, you are arguing for a particular way of looking at it; no argument succeeds without adequate support.
- **Write Using the Present Tense:** When you write about any literary work, use the present tense, sometimes called the *historic present*. Even though an author might write a story or poem in the past tense, when you read the work, the action happens for you in the present, the "right now" of your reading. You must write in that same "right now" sense.
- **Give Yourself Time Between the First and Next Drafts:** As with all academic writing, your objectivity and thinking about a draft become clearer when you let it sit for a day or two before coming back to it. Then, once you've been away from it, reread your paper and double-check important sections from the literary work for accuracy and validity of your points.
- **Revise:** All academic papers need more than one draft. None of us is able to say everything well in one shot; most literature professors rewrite their essays up to 30 times!
- **Edit and Proofread:** Edit your paper for clarity, concision of ideas, and correctness of such things as passages and quotations. Proof carefully for grammar, punctuation, and spelling errors.