

Writing About Literature: How and What to Write

This year, we will spend a great deal of time and energy learning how to write about literature. Gone are the days when writing about what you read meant simply providing a summary. Indeed, any such work will receive no credit. It is time to move beyond such summarizing and begin analyzing.

General Principles

There are a number of general principles to keep in mind when writing about literature.

- 1 Make sure you **understand what the question is asking for**. These prompts often include specific literary vocabulary, and this indicates what the evaluator will be looking for.
- 2 Don't assume the reader knows anything about the topic. These are not test questions; they're essay prompts. **The purpose is to give you a focus for your essay**; it is not to provide you with an opportunity for a five sentence answer.
- 3 **Define/explain the elements of the question**. If the question is asking about how the setting affects the plot, you need to describe both the setting and the plot. You need to do so, though, in a way that works toward answering the question.
- 4 **Be specific**. If you're writing about irony in a story, describe which type; don't simply say, "There's irony in this story."
- 5 It's important to **quote the text directly to provide evidence** of your assertions. To use the example from point 4 above, don't simply say there is situational irony. Describe the situation in the story that *creates* the irony, using direct quotes to highlight the best examples.
- 6 When referring to events of the story, **always use present tense**. Don't write that "Romeo wanted" to do something; write that "Romeo *wants*" to do something.

Using Quotes

Including direct quotations from the work you're writing about improves the authority of your essay and is one of the basic skills we will work on this year. Yet it's not simply a matter of dropping a quote into your paper: that's clumsy and amateurish. Instead, we will integrate quotes into our writing.

Integrating Quotes

When including quotes in your writing, it's best to try to integrate the quotation into a sentence of your own. In other words, don't simply say, "The author says," and quote the author.

- **Bad**: The narrator says, "Who can even imagine me looking a strange white man in the eye?" (232)
- **Good**: The narrator asks if anyone could imagine her "looking a strange white man in the eye" (232).

Notice that **the good example only quotes the core, the heart of the passage**.

Another point to keep in mind is the **use of pronouns**. When you include a passage in which the narrator speaks in first person, the "I" can be somewhat confusing. It's best to rework it to avoid the first person personal pronoun ("I").

- **Okay**: At one point the mother says, "I used to think [Dee] hated Maggie, too" (233),
- **Better**: At one point the mother admits that she "used to think [Dee] hated Maggie, too" (233).

Changing, Adding, and Eliminating

Occasionally, it's necessary to make some changes in the quote so that it fits with the rest of the sentence. There are three basic reasons you will need to edit the quote:

1. The tense of the quote is not the same as the tense of your writing. The quote might be in past tense while your writing will be in present tense. You'll have to change the tense in the quote in this case.
2. There's inconsistency between the personal pronoun usage in the quote and in your paper. You'll be referring to the narrator in third person (he/she); the narrator might be using first person (I/we). To maintain consistency, you will need to change your "I's" to "he's" and "she's."
3. The quote is long, and the truly relevant parts are scattered throughout the quote.

You must indicate all your additions and omissions by using brackets and ellipses.

Using Brackets

Brackets indicate a change or addition. If you need, for example, to add the word, you'll do it like this: "If you need, for example, to add a word **[to your quote]**, you'll do it like this."

If you wanted to avoid the second person and integrate better, you might do something like this: *If writers need to "add [or change] a word, [they'll] do it like this."*

Using Ellipses

Sometimes, you need to remove words from a quotation. To show that you have done this, include ellipses in the spaces where the omitted words were originally positioned. The ellipses are three periods, with a space between each: . . .

If you integrate your quotes well, though, you shouldn't have to make too many of these kinds of changes.

Literary Terminology

In order to write about literature, one must understand all the elements that go into good literature. Below is a list of major literary elements we will be studying and analyzing this year. It is a good idea to take the necessary time to

- 1 Plot and Setting
 - 1.1 Plot
 - 1.1.1 Exposition
 - 1.1.2 Rising action
 - 1.1.3 Climax
 - 1.1.4 Falling action
 - 1.1.5 Resolution/Denouement
 - 1.2 Conflict
 - 1.2.1 External
 - 1.2.1.1 Character versus society
 - 1.2.1.2 Character versus character
 - 1.2.1.3 Character versus nature
 - 1.2.2 Internal
 - 1.2.2.1 Character versus self
 - 1.2.2.2 Character versus society
 - 1.3 Flashback
 - 1.4 Foreshadowing
 - 1.5 Suspense
 - 1.6 Setting
 - 1.7 Mood
- 2 Character
 - 2.1 Character types
 - 2.1.1 Protagonist
 - 2.1.2 Antagonist
 - 2.1.3 Round character
 - 2.1.4 Flat character
 - 2.1.5 Static character
 - 2.1.6 Dynamic character
 - 2.2 Motivation
 - 2.3 Characterization
 - 2.3.1 Direct characterization
 - 2.3.2 Indirect characterization
- 3 Narrator and Voice
 - 3.1 Narrator
 - 3.1.1 First person

- 3.1.2 Third person
 - 3.1.2.1 Omniscient
 - 3.1.2.2 Limited
- 3.2 Voice
- 3.3 Tone
- 3.4 Mood
- 4 Symbolism and Irony
 - 4.1 Symbol
 - 4.2 Allegory
 - 4.3 Irony
 - 4.3.1 Verbal irony
 - 4.3.2 Situational irony
 - 4.3.3 Dramatic irony
 - 4.4 Ambiguity
- 5 Theme
 - 5.1 Universality
 - 5.2 Theme versus moral

Writing Prompts

Below are a number of prompts designed to help you in your writing about literature. Occasionally, you will receive an assignment just to “write about this story.” What do you write? Below are some ideas to help you get started.

Understand that these are only bare-bones, skeletal ideas for ways to analyze literature, and they are intended to be guiding questions

Plot

- How is this story told? What is the point of view of the story? How does this affect the story? What would be the effects of changing this point of view? What would we gain? What would we lose?
- Can we trust the narrator of this story? If so, how do we know? If not, why not?
- What is the conflict of the story? How dependent is it on the characters? On the setting? Could just anyone have this conflict, or is it specific to this particular setting and these particular characters?
- How is the story told? Is it a chronological plot, or does the telling seem to skip around in time? How does this affect the piece as a whole? How does it affect specific elements (perception of characters, setting, theme, etc.)?

Setting

- What role does the setting play in the story? Is it

integral to the plot, or can the story be told at any point or time?

- How does the setting impact the characters? Is there any way in which we could take these characters out of the setting without changing them?

Characters

- Why are the characters doing what they're doing? Do their claimed motivation and actual motivation differ? How do we know?
- How does a character develop in the story? What are the things that make the character who he/she is, and how do the changes come about?
- What are some of the relationships between the characters? Do some of them have multiple levels in their relationships?
- Who has the power in the novel? Who calls the shots? Why is this? Could this change? Does it change? Who tries to change it?

Theme

- How does the theme relate to the plot? Are they essentially inter-connected, or could the same theme arise from a different plot?
- How universal is this theme? Does it rise above all the other elements or does it seem to be connected directly to the plot, setting, and/or characters?

Language

- How does the language a character uses help develop the character?
- Do any characters change how they use language?
- What tone does the author take in this work? How does this tone affect our interpretation of the work?
- How are tone and mood related in this piece? Does one affect the other? If so, how specifically?
- What sort of figurative language does the author employ? How does this affect the mood? The tone?

Source

Examples used in this handout are from Janice E. Patten's page on using quotes.

(<http://www.sjsu.edu/faculty/patten/usingquotes.html>)