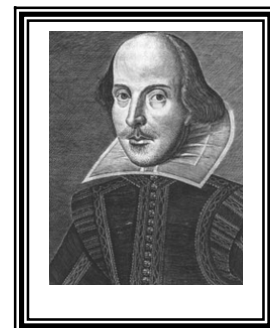




Writing about Literature

by Cornelius Rubsamén for the LRC



This handout is designed to help students of introductory literature classes plan, organize and write a literary analysis. Given the space restrictions imposed by the handout format, only the most commonly encountered problems can be addressed here. For further information, consult your class materials, instructor, or LRC tutor.

Things to look for:

- **Familiarize yourself with the assignment:** The best place to start is a careful review of the instructions given for the assignment. Is the instructor asking for a comparison, explication, or a discussion of themes? Or, as is often the case, is it left to you to write on a topic of your own choosing? If you have options, try to find a topic that interests you.
- **Thesis, support, evidence:** Perhaps the most important step of the pre-writing stage, defining and supporting a thesis statement is the key to writing a thoughtful and coherent paper. To do this, both the assignment and the student's own careful consideration of the work are needed. The best thesis statements are those that illuminate one aspect of the work under discussion that the casual reader would be likely to overlook. In order to stay within the page requirement while allowing for a thorough analysis, the thesis should be specific and clearly stated (e.g., The subplot in Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus* comments on the events of the main plot through the use of irony and foreshadowing). The body of the paper then should support the thesis based on textual evidence. The text is the primary source and should be sufficient to prove the thesis. Unless specifically stated in the assignment, the use of secondary sources such as criticism is generally to be avoided.
- **Use of quotes and MLA:** Since the text of the work is the only evidence available, quoting critical passages is crucial to supporting the thesis. However, the literary analysis is not an accumulation of quotes and they should therefore be kept to a minimum (generally no more than ten percent of the paper). Quotes should be carefully incorporated and thoroughly

discussed. In other words, the student should not quote a lengthy passage without explaining its significance in proving the thesis. If not told otherwise by the instructor, quotes are subject to MLA guidelines (a copy of the *MLA Handbook* is available at the front desk of the LRC).

- **Grammar:** It is advisable to save proofreading and editing tasks that deal with grammar and wording of sentences to the end. Not only does repeated editing of earlier drafts discourage the oftentimes necessary revising and even cutting of sections in the paper, but it also interrupts the flow of thought and thereby the creative process.

Things to avoid:

- **Summary:** One of the most common mistakes is to write a lengthy summary of the work rather than to analyze it. As a general rule, the audience consists of both the instructor and fellow classmates, who can be expected to be familiar with the work. It is therefore unnecessary to retell the “story.” Instead, as stated above, in order to keep the reader interested, the paper should present one’s own unique reading of the text.
- **Past tense:** In discussing a work of literature, use present tense verbs rather than past tense (e.g., Doctor Faustus *commits* his final act of disobedience to God by conjuring Helen of Troy).
- **Subjective expressions:** Do not weaken your statements by using subjective expressions such as “I feel like” or “In my opinion,” as it undermines the validity of your point.
- **Relating to modern day experience:** While we often hear that literature is supposed to teach us something about life, discussing the work in relation to modern day experience tends to weaken the focus of your analysis. It is more useful to focus on the text and the time period in which it was written.



Specifics pertaining to the types of literature:

When writing about literature it is important to identify the type of literature you are dealing with. Traditionally, literature is categorized as *poetry, drama, short story, novel, and non-fiction*. What follows is a discussion of some of the elements of each type of literature. Please note that this discussion is by no means comprehensive and merely touches upon some of the key elements. Moreover, the types of literature are interrelated and what is said about one type may apply to the others as well (e.g., Poetic elements are often central to a discussion of drama, while the dramatic elements explained here are equally relevant to the novel and short fiction).

Poetry: The oldest—and for a long time the most prestigious—form of literature, poetry distinguishes itself by creating more meaning in fewer words than *prose* (ordinary language, lacking rhyme and meter). This effect is achieved through the poet's use of poetic elements such as imagery, symbolism, tone, sound, meter, and language (for a thorough discussion of these elements consult a handbook on poetry). There are several important practices to observe when writing about poetry.

- ✓ First, since poetry originates from the oral tradition (long before reading and writing began to take over), it is a good idea to read poetry aloud and listen to the sound and rhythm. Edgar Allen Poe's best-known poem "The Raven," for instance, owes much of its popularity to rhythm. In the following line, we can see how Poe uses *alliteration* (the repetition of initial sounds in a series of words) to imitate the "tip tap" of the approaching raven: "While I nodded, nearly napping, suddenly there came a tapping" (3).
- ✓ Second, since poets generally pick their words very carefully to create multiple meanings, it is crucial to be sure what each word means. If the meaning of a word eludes you, be sure to look it up in a dictionary. In that respect, the *connotative* (implied) meaning is just as important as the *denotative* (literal) meaning of the word. The issue is further complicated if the poet uses unusual word combinations. In "Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking," Walt Whitman describes his calling as a poet: "By the sea under the yellow and sagging moon, / The messenger there arous'd, the fire, the *sweet hell* within, / The unknown want, the destiny of me." (155-7, emphasis added). The unusual combination "sweet hell" deserves special attention as it points to the poet's divided view of his profession.
- ✓ Third, consider who the speaker (the voice) in the poem is. Note that poet and speaker are not synonymous, as the poet creates the speaker to fit his intended effect. Instead, notice any hint at the speaker's values and attitudes, and how they might influence his convictions. The speaker in T. S. Eliot's "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," for instance, repeatedly wonders what others will think of his physical appearance: "They will say: 'How his hair is

growing thin!’” (41). These self-conscious assertions are crucial for any discussion of the poem and determine our response to the speaker in the poem.



Drama: Like poets, playwrights frequently employ poetic elements (see above) to create additional meaning. Unlike poetry, however, considerations of character development and plot move to the foreground. In order to interpret the characters and action in a play, a couple of conventions must be explained.

- ✓ First, our initial response to a character stems from his actions and words, as well as what other characters think about him. We have to keep in mind, though, that the information we are getting from other characters can be biased depending on the relationship between them. The only time we get a chance to see what is really going on in the character's mind is through the *soliloquy*. The *soliloquy* shows a character speaking his thoughts out loud after the other characters have left the stage. In Shakespeare's *Henry the Fourth, Part I*, Prince Hal explains the reasons behind his riotous and disgraceful behavior in a soliloquy: "I'll so offend to make offense a skill, / Redeeming time when men think least I will" (1.2.189-90). It becomes plain to the audience at this point that the heir to the throne is putting up a façade to deceive his enemies into dismissing him as a serious contender for the crown.
- ✓ In addition, playwrights frequently introduce *foils* to develop characters. A *foil* is a character who is very much like the main character, but differs in some key aspects. In *Hamlet*, to illustrate, Shakespeare creates the character Laertes as a rash and hot-blooded youth to contrast with Hamlet's self-doubting delay in avenging his father's murder. Juxtaposing the two young men draws special attention to Hamlet's flaw and makes us wonder whether he would be better off possessing some of his foil's rashness.
- ✓ A similar device to the *foil*, playwrights commonly use a *subplot* to comment on the action of the main events. A *subplot* is subordinate to the main plot, but enriches the latter by employing similar themes. In some cases, the *subplot* serves to provide *comic relief* from the serious action of the main events.



Short story: Unlike poetry, the short story is written entirely in *prose*. Many short stories observe the following set pattern: *introduction, conflict, climax,*

and *resolution*. Understanding how this pattern contributes to the final meaning of a short story will facilitate analysis.

- ✓ The *introduction* provides necessary background information about the setting and characters. Since there is no time to develop characters as fully as in the novel, it is your responsibility as an active reader to pick up any hints that help understand a character's subsequent action. In Tim O'Brien's shockingly realistic "The Things They Carried," the characters are defined and distinguished from one another by the peculiar items in their backpacks: "First Lieutenant Jimmy Cross carried letters from a girl named Martha, a junior at Mount Sebastian College in New Jersey.... Until he was shot, Ted Lavender carried six or seven ounces of premium dope, which for him was a necessity. Mitchel Sanders, the RTO, carried condoms. Norman Bowker carried a diary. Rat Kiley carried comic books" (1023). Each one of those items tells us something about the characters' hopes, fears, and values.
- ✓ The *conflict* in the story arises when these ordinary people have to deal with the nightmare of the Vietnam War. One by one we see them lose their old identity in their attempts to cope with the war. The key event is clearly the death of Ted Lavender, which prompts various responses from his comrades. Most notably, Lieutenant Cross blames himself for neglecting his duty by paying more attention to the letters in his backpack than to the safety of the men under his command. It is crucial to identify this event as the conflict of the story in order to interpret the characters.
- ✓ The *climax* portrays the soldiers reduced to animals, desperately trying to keep their sanity. Each man is pushed to the limits in coping with the death of his friend. Their different means of coming to terms with the war in general, and Lavender's death in particular, constitutes the *climax* of "The Things They Carried." Notice how O'Brien puts his ordinary characters in extraordinary circumstances to show a side of their character that would not otherwise come out.
- ✓ The *resolution* then shows Lieutenant Cross succumbing to the war and burning the pictures and letters of his high school love, the thought of whom he felt interfered with his war-time obligations: "Lieutenant Cross reminded himself that his obligation was not to be loved but to lead. He would dispense with love; it was not now a factor" (O'Brien 1036). This is O'Brien's final statement on the effect the Vietnam War had on the young soldiers and neatly sums up the story.



Novel: The most obvious difference between the novel and the short story is that the novel is longer. With the increased length, however, come more subtle differences, especially those pertaining to character development.

Character development refers to the way in which characters are brought to life by the novelist. A few literary terms will facilitate discussion of characters.

- ✓ Characters can be either *flat* or *round*. A *flat* character is an undeveloped stereotype and psychologically easy to understand. If you can sum up the character in a couple of phrases, chances are the character is *flat*. One particular type of *flat* character we encounter frequently is the *stock* character, which includes such familiar stereotypes as the jealous husband, the angelic heroine, and the dehumanized and unforgiving law-enforcer. Minor characters especially have a tendency to be flat as they only serve to advance the plot. Round characters, on the other hand, are well developed and life-like. Their complexity and psychological depth often makes it difficult to figure out and predict their actions. Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, for instance, baffles us when he puts considerable effort into "bestowing the spark of life" into dead matter (contrary to popular myth, Frankenstein is the creator of the monster), only to dedicate his life to the destruction of his creation as soon as his task is accomplished.
- ✓ Another important distinction is to be made between *static* and *dynamic* characters. A *static* character is one who remains unchanged over the course of the story; a *dynamic* character undergoes a fundamental change and grows as a result of the book's events. Again Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* provides a good example. Victor Frankenstein remains a quest-driven character throughout the story. Although his focus changes from creating to destroying the creature, he never seems to learn from his mistakes and could therefore be called *static*. Walton, the sea captain who listens to Victor's tale, on the other hand, is *dynamic* in that he understands the fatal consequences of over-ambition inherent in Victor's story and promptly orders his crew to abandon the perilous journey to the North Pole. When you reach the conclusion that a character is *dynamic*, it is worthwhile to note what triggers this change (e.g., Walton's change of mind is a direct result of hearing Frankenstein's story).



Non-fiction: Non-fiction differs from the literature discussed so far in that it is written in prose and deals with factual events. It includes speeches, historical documents, essays, letters and journals. I will give an example of each and suggest possible approaches.

- ✓ A famous speech that is frequently studied in literature classes is Abraham Lincoln's "Gettysburg Address." Aside from being a profound statement on what government should be like, Lincoln's speech has endured for its clever

use of repetition and rhythm: "Government of the people, by the people, for the people shall not perish from the earth."

- ✓ Like speeches, historical documents often mark turning points in a civilization's religious and political convictions. Documents like the French "Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen" or its American counterpart the "Declaration of Independence" mark the beginning of a reformation of political institutions and had a profound impact on imaginative literature of the time.
- ✓ Although essays frequently comment on important historical events and scrutinize political institutions, the range of topics is far more diverse and the style tends to be less formal than that of speeches and historical documents. Jonathan Swift's "A Modest Proposal," for instance, masterfully uses satire to criticize England's indifference to a food shortage in Ireland.
- ✓ On a more personal level, letters and journals give us an insight into the most intimate thoughts of great writers. John Keats, for example, redefined the role of the poet in his letters, while Mary Shelley's journals shed light on the creation of *Frankenstein*, which may entirely change our interpretation of the novel.



Other Resources found in the LRC

- **Handouts:** Aside from this handout, the LRC has a large collection of handouts, treating a variety of writing-related subjects. Take a look at, for instance, Leslie Munro's excellent "Organizing Information I: Outlining" and Rae Watanabe's "MLA Online Citations: Quick Sheet."
- **Sample Papers:** Some instructors keep a file of model papers written by other students. This is a good way of finding out how others have handled the task and what your instructor's expectations are.
- **Reference Books:** The LRC has a number of good reference books that can be obtained from the front desk. Most of the writing guides, for instance, have a section on literature, which explains the process of writing about

literature. Many of those also contain a useful list of literary terms and definitions. In addition, the *MLA Handbook* is an authoritative guide on the format of your paper in general and the treatment of quotes in particular.

- **English Tutors:** English tutors are another valuable resource found in the LRC. Even though the English tutors' expertise is not necessarily literature, they will be glad to look over your papers and comment on the organization, MLA requirements, and grammatical errors.
- **Internet:** The Internet is a double-edged resource to consult. While there is an abundance of extremely useful material, there is just as much second rate information. As a general rule, use your best critical judgment and stay away from pages that summarize or superficially analyze a work. One of the better sites to visit is: <http://web.uvic.ca/wguide/Pages/LiteraryEssay.html>

Works Cited

- Eliot, T. S.. "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock." McMichael 1812-1815.
Lincoln, Abraham. "Gettysburg Address." McMichael 1035.
McMichael, George, ed. *Concise Anthology of American Literature*. 3rd ed. New York: Macmillan Publishing, 1993.
O'Brien, Tim. "The Things They Carried." *Responding to Literature*. Comp. Judith A. Stanford. 2nd ed. Mountain View: Mayfield Publishing, 1996. 1023-1037.
Poe, Edgar Allan. "The Raven." McMichael 485-488.
Shakespeare, William. *The First Part of King Henry the Fourth*. *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*. Ed. M. H. Abrams. 6th ed. Vol. 1. New York: Norton, 1993. 822-887.
Whitman, Walt. "Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking." McMichael 1117-1121.

