

How to Write the Literature Essay

Literature Essay - has particular elements and a particular form because it serves a specific purpose. An essay articulates, supports and develops one major idea or claim. It aims to explore something complex so that a reader may gain a new and deeper understanding. Both **analysis** (breaking the work down into its constituent parts and showing how they work together to form a meaningful whole) and **argument** (working to convince someone that the analysis is valid).

- **Your essay** needs to persuade its readers that your interpretation is reasonable and enlightening. It is more than merely subjective.

Elements of the Literature Essay:

Must incorporate **five elements** including the following:

1. an effective tone
2. a compelling thesis
3. motive
4. ample appropriate evidence
5. coherent structure p. 2224

Tone - tone and audience are closely interrelated. You act on your knowledge of who your audience is, what information they already have and what their response is likely to be. Adopt a tone that will encourage your listener to respond in a specific way. Your audience shapes your tone and tone shapes your audience's response.

- You write about literature to learn how to write for a general audience of peers.
- **The purpose of your essay** - is to persuade multiple readers with differing outlooks and opinions to see the text your way. The tone of your paper should be serious, straightforward, and respectful toward your readers and the literary work.
- **Demonstrate in your essay** the stance you want readers to take toward your essay.
- **Encourage your readers** to keep an open mind. Engage your readers by demonstrating genuine engagement with the text, the topic and the enterprise of writing.

Ways of Setting the Right Tone:

- **Write about literature in the present tense.** Writing in present tense is a convention that helps you avoid confusing tense shifts. Present tense actually makes logical sense when you think about it.
- **Use the word "I" carefully.** The first person can create a real sense of engagement and of "presence," of a distinctive mind at work. Inexperienced writers so often use it inappropriately and ineffectively. Resorting to "I feel" or "I think" substitutes expressions of feeling for actual argument. p. 2226

Thesis - a thesis is the governing idea or claim. Only one thesis is required, which is explicitly stated in about one to three sentences somewhere in the introduction, usually at or near its end. A thesis must be debatable - a claim that all readers won't automatically accept.

- **Thesis statements** are arguable because each implicitly answers a compelling interpretive question to which multiple, equally reasonable answers seem possible.
- **Active verbs** must be used to capture what the text and / or its implied author does, implying further interpretive questions.
- A **good thesis** inspires readers with the desire to see the writer's prove the thesis. It captures readers' interest and shapes their expectations. It also makes specific promises to readers that the rest of the essay must fulfill.

- A **thesis** needs to stake out a position, and admit complexity.
- A **good thesis** can be a claim about just what the key question or conflict explored in a text is rather than about how that question is answered or that conflict resolved.

Why is a Literature Essay NOT a Review?

Theses typically involve **interpretive claims**, or claims about how a literature text works, what it says, and how one should understand it. **Evaluation** (or review) entails assessment and **evaluative claims** about literature that tend to be either aesthetic assessments or personal preferences which is not the goal of a thesis. **Literature Essays ARE NOT REVIEWS!**

- **Evaluative Claims** - are unwanted and involves moral, philosophical, social or political judgment - whether an idea or action is wise or good, valid or admirable, something you “agree with.”
- **Evaluative Claims** - are unwanted and assess the validity of those opinions and values, often by comparison with one’s own.
- A **Literature Essay** thoughtfully explore what the work communicates and how it does so. You can consider **evaluative questions** in your **conclusion** only. An **effective essay** doesn’t just state a **thesis**. It also interests us in that thesis by framing it as a response.

Motive - you must keep in mind an articulating motive that considers the following:

1. Crafting a strong motive requires giving real substance to the argument you respond to, taking it seriously enough that your readers do, too.
2. Responding to another point of view doesn’t have to mean disagreeing with it.
3. “Although...I think...because...” is a useful sentence to use as you plan or summarize an argument, not a sentence that should actually appear in an essay, in part because it creates problems with tone. p. 2231

Evidence - Showing readers that your interpretation and argument are valid requires ample, appropriate evidence. Evidence refers to facts. Literary critics turn facts into evidence by interpreting it, drawing an inference from it, giving the reader a vivid sense of why and how the fact demonstrates a specific claim. Kinds of literary evidence include the following:

- **Quotations** - are especially important form of evidence, where attention is paid to character motivations, speaker’s tone, etc. Quote from the text only when the actual wording is significant.
- **Paraphrase**
- **Summary**
- **Description**

Structure - must include a beginning (the **introduction**), a middle (or **body**), and an ending (or **conclusion**).

- **Introduction** - needs to draw reads in and prepare them for what is to come by articulating your thesis, your motive, and by providing basic information about the author, the topic, the text and its contexts. A very short (one-sentence) plot summary or description of the text is useful, as is providing background information. Avoid sentences that are only “filler.”
- **Middle (the body)** - this is where you do the essential work of supporting and developing your thesis by presenting and analyzing evidence. Each body paragraph needs to articulate, support and develop one specific claim - a debatable idea directly related to the thesis, but smaller and more specific. State the claim fairly early in the paragraph in a **topic sentence**. Every sentence in the paragraph should help prove and elaborate on the claim. Each paragraph functions like a miniature essay with its own thesis, body, and conclusion. The

essay should develop logically, just as each paragraph does. Order paragraphs so that each builds on the last, with one idea following another in a logical sequence.

- **Conclusion** - are introductions in reverse. While introductions work to convince readers that they should read the essay, conclusions work to show them why and how the experience was worthwhile. Think about what specific sort of lasting impression you want to create. Effective conclusions often consider at least one of three things: **Implications, Evaluation, Areas of ambiguity or unresolved questions.**

Implications - What picture of your author's work or worldview does your argument imply? What might your argument suggest about some real-world issue or situation?

Evaluations - Careful interpretations earns you the right to do some thoughtful evaluation. What might your specific interpretation of the text reveal about its literary quality or effectiveness? To what extent and how exactly do you agree or disagree with the author's conclusions about a particular issue?

Areas of ambiguity or unresolved questions - Are there any remaining puzzles or questions that your argument or the text itself doesn't resolve or answer? Or might your argument suggest a new question or puzzle worth investigating?

Above all, do not merely repeat what you have already said!