

Writing Guide: The Literature Essay

1. A good literary essay (or any essay, for that matter) requires two things to be effective:
 - (1) a strong thesis sentence or central idea about your topic
 - (2) adequate support for or development of your thesis sentence.
2. It is helpful to think of your thesis sentence as the answer to the question *What are you trying to prove?* and your supporting (body) paragraphs as the answer to the question *What have you got to go on?* or *Why should we believe you?*
3. A good thesis statement contains a topic (*The story "Young Goodman Brown"*) followed by a clear focus (*is a study of the internal evil that can overtake the religiously naive*).
4. Here are more examples of effective thesis statements:

Despite its hilarity, Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five* is actually a deadly serious book.

Shakespeare's greatest comic creations are Bottom, Falstaff, and Dogberry.

The sea acts as a metaphor for deep, unconscious desires in Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*.

Edgar Allan Poe's "The Tell-Tale Heart" and "The Black Cat" tell almost exactly the same story.

Robert Frost's sonnet "Design" is a meditation on a Godless, mechanistic universe.

Shakespeare's *Richard II* and *Richard III* portray two different kinds of bad king: one passively bad, the other actively so.

Though he makes horrible errors in judgment, Lear is clearly the noblest character in *King Lear*.

Though Jay Gatsby is dazzling and mysterious, Nick Carraway is the true hero in Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*.

Willa Cather's "Paul's Case" is a classic study of the fake artist, the dilettante.



5. Use quotations and specific examples from stories, novels, poems, or plays to support your assertions. You can say virtually anything you want in an essay, but you must have support for it--the text itself is the best source of support. Don't merely retell the story in your essay; remember that you're trying to prove a point about the story.

6. When quoting poetry, enclose quotations of 3 or fewer lines in quotation marks within the text of your essay. Indicate line breaks with a slash. Include line numbers in parentheses at the end of the quotation. In the case of a verse play, provide act and scene numbers as well:

In the very first scene, the Witches tell us that all is not right in the world of *Macbeth*: "Fair is foul, and foul is fair. / Hover through the fog and filthy air" (1.1.11-12).

7. When quoting 4 or more lines of poetry, set the quotation off from the rest of your text by indenting one tab (or 10 spaces) from the left margin, and omit the quotation marks. Include line numbers (as well as act and scene numbers, if appropriate) after the final punctuation mark:

At this point in the play, Lady Macbeth is dead, and Macbeth plumbs the depths of nihilism:

Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage
And then is heard no more. It is a tale
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
Signifying nothing. (5.5.24-28)

8. When quoting prose, enclose 4 or fewer typed lines in quotation marks within the text of your essay. Put page number after the quotation.

The narrator in Joanna Russ's "When It Changed" describes men as "apes with human faces" and says that they are "heavy as draft horses" (412).

9. When quoting 5 or more typed lines of prose, set it off in the same way that you would a long poetry quotation. Put page number after the quotation.

Asimov's classic story "Nightfall" depicts the death of a planet through the consciousness of the hero, Theremon:

It was very horrible to go mad and know that you were going mad--to know that in a little minute you would be here physically



and yet all the real essence would be dead and drowned in the black madness. For this was the Dark--the Dark and the Cold and the Doom. The bright walls of the universe were shattered and their awful black fragments were falling down to crush and obliterate him. (152)

10. Use present tense when discussing events in literature. For example, write *In "The Faith of Our Fathers," Dick's protagonist, Tung Chien, realizes something very shocking about the nature of God.* **Not** *In "The Faith of Our Fathers," Dick's protagonist, Tung Chien, realized something very shocking about the nature of God.*
11. Put quotation marks around the titles of poems ("Lady Lazarus"). Italicize or underline titles of novels, plays, and book-length poems (*Twelfth Night*).
12. If you borrow words or ideas from a book, a Web site, or a periodical, use MLA documentation style to cite the material. Put quotation marks around exact borrowings of words.
13. Briefly, MLA documentation style is an in-text system that tells the reader the source of any information that you have borrowed. Here's an example:

In-text citation (in body of essay):

In his book *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human*, Harold Bloom argues that Shakespeare wrote an early, now-lost version of *Hamlet* in the late 1580s (383).

Works-cited entry (at end of essay):

Bloom, Harold. *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human*. New York: Riverhead, 1998. Print.