

Writing a short essay about literature

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Some students find writing about literature to be a chore—the impression a story leaves on them may seem too broad, or too vague; they may fear that they lack the critical faculties necessary to write something worth reading.

Fear not—if you've read the story, you can say something worthwhile about it. Understanding narrative isn't something you need to learn to do; it's an inherent ability of human beings. What you DO need to learn, however, is to refine and clarify your understanding, to make it communicable to others.

In this class, I am not interested in how many references to famous literary critics you can rack up in three pages—I'm interested in your opinions. You may want to do a bit of outside research on your essays, depending on the topic, but it is by no means required. All that is required is a clear, supported description of your thoughts on a particular work.

The point of studying literature, as opposed to just reading it, is to learn how other people read it, so that you can broaden your understanding—and, ultimately, your enjoyment—of it. Do you need literature classes to lose yourself in a good book? Of course not. But broadening your understanding can make reading a greater pleasure, and its lessons will sink in deeper.

So. Where to start? Think about what you find most interesting in a story, and then consider *why* that interests you. Your reactions are related to who you are, and what you know. Once you have a topic, take a look at the “Writing About Short Stories” handout on the class website. Below, then, are a list of things to look for in fiction, things that might serve as a springboard for an interesting essay. These are just ideas—feel free to use them, but think of other approaches as well, when you read. In a pinch, check the glossary of literary terms I uploaded to the website—it may spark some good ideas.

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• **Writing Style.** Style is what we notice first about a story—what kind of storyteller is this, and why does she write that way? A very “voicey” story, such as Eudora Welty's “Why I Live At The P.O.,” begs the question—why would the writer choose such a frenetic voice for this particular story? Or did the voice come first, and the rest followed? You might compare a couple of stories or novels—in this class, perhaps, the difference between the cultured voice of *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* and the clipped harshness of *The Big Sleep*.

- **Narrative Structure.** Maybe the story is completely linear, proceeding from start to finish without interruption. Maybe it's shot through with flashbacks. Maybe all the events are jumbled up in time, or perhaps the whole thing is told backwards; maybe there are two or three parallel story lines. What does the narrative approach accomplish?
- **Character.** The most important element of a literary story. Who is the story about? How do the characters interact in this world? Is the narrator the main character, and is he hiding something from us? Is the author going for psychological depth and analysis, or do we learn about characters through their actions? How does the character relate to the plot—do events change her, or does she drive events? Or both?
- **Time and Place.** A story set in Alabama in 1863 is guaranteed to be very, very different from one set in New York City in 2004. Why is the story placed where and when it is? Was the author writing about the past, or about his own time? Is the author inexorably shaped by her own time and place, or does she wield more objective control?
- **Motifs and Symbols.** Uh oh...this is the approach to every terrible essay you were asked to write in high school. “The whale represents nature,” right? Well, excessive attention to symbols can create some real howlers, but it is true that writers sometimes do sneak in recurring or distinctive elements which have a hidden meaning. More often, however, writers do this kind of thing without even knowing they're doing it. Metaphor is a natural way to look at the world, and the mind is built to make connections like this. Find a few and discuss how they affect the story.
- **The Author's Life.** It's a mistake to assume that all fiction is somehow biographical in nature. But it definitely enhances one's understanding of, say, Flannery O'Connor if you know that she was a devout Christian, or of George Saunders if you know he used to write technical prose for a large chemical corporation. Writers are shaped by their lives—explore this idea.
- **Point of View.** A first-person narrator “tells” the story in her own voice, often using the word “I” (or, in a few memorable stories, “we”). A third-person narrator typically doesn't refer to himself; he's a stand-in for the author. Beyond these definitions, there are lots of possibilities—perhaps Ms. First-Person is a complete liar. Or the third-person narrator may be able to read one character's thoughts (“third-person limited”), or everyone's thoughts (“omniscient”); or maybe the narrator only reveals what can be seen, like a roving surveillance camera. How does the point of view reflect, or drive, the story's larger goals?

- **Realism.** Most literary fiction roughly follows a psychological-realist line, attempting to create a narrative that seems plausible and true, and fits in the “real world.” Some fiction, however, such as China Mieville's *The City And The City*, may introduce fantastical elements, or inhabit an invented world, or break the rules of narrative, or even of grammar. How is, or isn't, the story “realistic,” and what purpose does the approach serve?

- **Allusion.** If, in a short story, a guy named Achilles and a guy named Hector get into a fight in a bar, you know you're reading an allusion to Homer's *Iliad*. Other allusions may not be quite so obvious, but it is not uncommon for a writer to strengthen or complicate her story by giving you the opportunity to recall well-known works or historical incidents. A story doesn't need these, of course, and a reader doesn't have to notice them to “get” the story...but they can be useful and interesting. Find and analyze the allusions in a story of your choosing.

- **Action vs. Cogitation.** Some stories are merely descriptions of events. In others, nothing seems to happen whatsoever—there's just somebody thinking. How can such stories be equally compelling? The fact is, they can, and our understanding of “plot” is more complex than one might initially think. How does your chosen story combine action and exposition/analysis, and why?

- **Beginning and Ending.** Probably the #1 complaint about any given story or novel is that the ending is no good. And how many times have you read something that starts slowly, but ends up being thrilling? A writer chooses a beginning and ending in order to create a certain rhythm, to undermine our hopes, to create false impressions...analyze what your writer of choice is up to.

- **Tension.** Every story needs a little dramatic tension. If A and B are best friends, and meet by chance in the laundromat, we expect nothing. If A is having an affair with B's spouse, however, we can't wait to see what happens. How does the writer in question create tension, and how is that tension discharged? Does its placement in the story have an effect on the story's emotional impact?

- **Hero vs. Anti-Hero.** We think of the protagonist in a story as somebody we like, and with whom we identify. In most good stories, however, our relationship to the protagonist is more complex. Raskolnikov, the confused killer in *Crime and Punishment*, is no hero, but Dostoevsky causes us to identify powerfully with him anyway, showing us a part of human nature we might otherwise be averse to seeing. Indeed, Raskolnikov is an anti-hero. In the story you're analyzing, consider to what extent you identify with the protagonist, and how the author plays with your loyalties in order to make her point.