

WRITING ARGUMENTS ABOUT LITERATURE

One of the best ways to become an active reader is to read with a pencil in hand –that is, to annotate a text, to make jottings in a journal, and ultimately to draft and revise essays. Writing a good argumentative essay begins with arguing with oneself, which it is the essential ingredient in **critical thinking**. When writers begin to examine their responses and their own assumptions, they have taken essential steps in developing an argument that they can set forth for readers.

Developing your reading and writing skills will not only help you literature courses, or other courses in humanities that you may take. Your skills in reading and writing are important for your development as an educated adult. Becoming an alert reader and an effective writer should be among the central goals of your education.

Our subject is to write about literature. American poet Robert Frost once said, “All there is to writing is having ideas.” But how do you get ideas? One of the best ways to get ideas –to educate yourself, so to speak- is to ask yourself questions and to answer them honestly.

Here are some basic questions:

What is my first response to the work? Am I bored, puzzled, amused, shocked, or what? And exactly *why* do I have this response?

Who is speaking? What voice do I hear – for instance, a happy (or unhappy) lover, a troubled child, a puzzle parent?

What does the form contribute? The work may be a song, with rhymes, so even if it talks of unfaithful men and sighing women it may offer pleasing patterns of sound.

The best way to get ideas –to *discover* ideas you didn’t know you had- is to annotate the text, with underlinings, marginal queries, and tentative responses of all sorts. These jottings will generate further thoughts, will *teach* you, and in time, you will be able to teach the reader of your paper.

When writing about a work, you will want to do much more than say, “I really liked the story,” or “This poem bored me.” You may indeed jot down some such words for a start, but you will want to go further, partly because you know that your instructor wants a good deal more, but also partly because you will find that, having written these words, *you* want to say more. If the work puzzles or bores or in some other way displeases you, you probably want to find out *why* you have this response. And, to your surprise, you may find that at this stage you do not know why you feel the way you do. In the process of returning to the work in order to find out why you feel the way you do – that is, to find supporting evidence for your ideas- you may change your mind.

It does not mean that you will inevitably come to like the work, but when you better understand your own response you will arrive at a better understanding of the work. Similarly, it is possible that when you return to a work that pleases you, looking for the causes of your pleasure, you may find that it is not as interesting as you thought at first. Perhaps you will come to see it as unimaginative, cliché-ridden, or sentimental. In either case, thoughtful examination of the work will, in the long run, prove satisfying.

What characterizes a sound interpretation?

An **interpretation** is a setting forth of meaning, or a setting forth of one or more of the meanings of a work of literature.

Almost no one believes that all interpretations are equal, or that “It’s all just a matter of opinion.” If all opinions about literature (or art or music) were equal, no one would take university courses in these subjects. Why spend time and money listening to an “expert” when all opinions are equal?

An interpretative essay is offered against a background of ideas, shared by essayist and reader, as to what constitutes a **persuasive argument**. Thus, an essay worth reading (or writing) will be

- coherent
- plausible, and
- rhetorically effective –that is, written so that the reader is persuaded to share, at least in some degree, the author’s view.

The presentation –the rhetoric- as well as the basic idea or interpretation, is significant. This means that the writer cannot merely set down random expressions of feeling of unsupported opinions. The writer must, on the contrary, in an orderly and a convincing way **argue a thesis** – must **point to evidence** so that the reader will know not only what the writer believes, but also understand *why* he or she believes it.

There are lots of ways of making sense (and even more ways of making nonsense), but one important way of helping readers to see things from your point of view is to do your best to address all of the complexities of the work. Put it this way: some interpretations strike a reader as better than others because they are more inclusive, that is, because they account for more of the details of the work. Less satisfactory interpretations leave a reader pointing to some aspects of the work –to some parts of the whole- and saying, “Yes, but your explanation doesn’t take account of...” This does not mean that a reader must feel that a persuasive interpretation says the last word about the work. The work is richer than the discussion; but again, in order to value an interpretation it is essential that the reader find the interpretation plausible and inclusive.

What characterizes a good interpretation then? The short answer is **evidence**, and especially evidence that seems to cover all relevant issues. In an essay it is not enough merely to assert an interpretation. Your readers don’t expect you to make an airtight case, but because you are trying to help readers understand a work – to see a work the way you have come to see it after carefully questioning your initial responses- you are obliged to:

- offer reasonable supporting evidence, and
- take account of what might be set forth as counterevidence to your thesis.

Your essay might originate in an intuition or an emotional response, a sense that the work is about such-and-such; this intuition or emotion must then be examined, and it must stand a test of reasonableness. (It’s usually a good idea to jot your first responses to a work down in a journal, and reflect on them in later entries.) It is not enough in an essay merely to set forth your response. Your readers will expect you to demonstrate that your response is something that they can to a large degree understand. They may not be

convinced that the interpretation is right or true, but they must at least feel that the interpretation is plausible and in accord with the details of the work, rather than highly eccentric or irreconcilable with some details.

Thinking critically about responses to literature: Arguing with yourself

Usually you will begin with a strong response to your reading –interest, boredom, bafflement, annoyance, shock, pleasure, etc. Fine. If you are going to think critically about what you have read, you will *examine* your response by checking it against the work. Revisiting the reading in the context of your response to it can help deepen or change your response.

How can you change an instinctive emotional response? **Critical thinking** involves seeing an issue from all sides, to as great a degree as possible. As you know, in ordinary language “to criticize” usually means to find fault, but in literary studies the term does not have a negative connotation. Rather, it means “to examine carefully” (the word “criticism” comes from a Greek verb meaning “to distinguish,” “to decide,” “to judge.”) Nevertheless, in one sense the term “critical thinking” does approach the usual meaning of “criticism”, since critical thinking requires you to take a skeptical view of your own response. You will, so to speak, argue with yourself or seek to find fault with your initial view. That is, you try to raise questions that a skeptical reader might raise, in an effort to improve your position.

Critical thinking, in short, means examining or exploring one’s own responses by questioning and testing them. Critical thinking is not so much a skill (though it does involve the ability to understand a text) as it is a habit of mind, rather, several habits, including:

- open mindedness,
- intellectual curiosity, and
- a willingness to work.

Why we write arguments about literature

Reading, thinking about, and writing about literature do not make a reader richer or morally better, but they do open the reader's eyes to point of view, to states of feelings, that he or she might not have been aware of. When experiencing a work of literature we hear a report about a range of behavior, whether or not the author is trying to tell us how we should behave.

It is important to remember that we write about literature in order to clarify and to account for our responses to works that interest or excite or frustrate us. In putting words on paper, we have to take a second and a third look at what is in front of us and at what is within us. Writing is a way of learning, largely by thinking about and questioning our responses, in effect arguing with ourselves until we are reasonably satisfied with what our responses are, and why we have them.

Writing, in short, is a form of critical thinking.

The last word is never said about complex thoughts and feelings- and works of literature as well as our responses to them embody complex thoughts and feelings. Still, when we write about literature we hope to make at least a little progress in the difficult but rewarding job of talking about our responses. When we write we learn, we also hope to interest our reader by communicating our responses to material that is worth talking about.

THE WRITING PROCESS

1. Consider the writing situation:

- *Is the specific topic assigned, or do you choose your own?* If the choice is yours, choose a work you like –but allow plenty of time, because you may find, once you get to work, that you want to change the topic.
- *How long will the essay be?* Schedule an appropriate amount of time.
- *What kinds of sources are you expected to use?* Only your own insights, supplemented by conversations with friends? Some textbooks? Some research? Again, allow the appropriate amount of time.

- *Who is the audience?* Classmates? Readers of *Time* magazine? Awareness of your audience will help you to determine the amount of detail you need to provide.
- *When is the essay due?* Allow time to write, proofread, and check any sources.

2. **Get at least a few ideas before you write a first draft.** You can immediately generate some ideas by thinking about the impact the work makes on you. Annotate the text in an effort to help you grasp it: Underline words in the text that you think are especially significant, draw lines connecting key words that, though in separate lines, seemed linked to you, and jot down your tentative responses by the margin. Did some words puzzle you? Look them up, and think about why the writer may have used unusual words. You may also get some starting ideas by thinking about relevant assertions you heard in classroom discussions –in your final essay be sure to give credit for any ideas that you borrow. Jot down whatever comes to mind –key phrases will do- and you probably will find that these jottings engender further ideas.

3. **Rearrange your ideas into a scratch outline**, i.e., a tentative plan for a draft. A list of a few phrases indicating (a) the topics you plan to address (for instance “conflict” “characterization”) and (b) the sequence of your ideas will help you to get going. This outline will probably indicate that the first paragraph will name the writers of the works of literature and will specify the general approach or scope of the paper. Additional jottings, in consequence, indicate the gist of what each paragraph might be concerned with.

4. **Start writing, without worrying about correctness.** Yes, you have been putting down words, but these activities are what composition instructors call “pre-writing.” Now you are in a position to really write. If you have made an outline, begin by following it, but remember, **the outline is a helpful guide to get you going, not a road map that must be followed.** Write freely, get your ideas down on paper. At this stage, you are still wrestling with ideas, trying things out, clarifying things for yourself, engaging in a search-and-discovery operation. These pages are not a first draft; rather they are what writing teachers call a zero draft, so don’t worry about mechanical matters such as spelling and punctuation and stylistic elegance. Such things will be important when you revise and edit, but at the moment you are trying to find out what your ideas are, and how much sense they make.

Later, of course, you will reread with a critical (and skeptical) mind what you have written –you will want to make sure that assertions are supported by evidence-but for now, follow your instincts.

5. **Reread and revise the material**, preferably after an interval of a few hours or even a day.

You are now prepared to write a serious draft. Your tentative of working thesis –the main point that you will support with evidence- has now evolved into a point that you have confidence in. Revise the copy with a pen or pencil; check if a paragraph is too long, or if quotations are too long and too frequent.

Revisions will actually be of two sorts: **global** (large scale, such as reorganization) and **local** (the substitution of a precise word for an imprecise one, or a spelling correction.) generally speaking, try to begin by making the necessary global revisions – you may, for instance, decide that introductory background material is or is not needed, or that background material should be distributed throughout the essay rather than given all at once at the start, or that additional evidence is needed to support some assertion, or that some material in our final paragraph ought to appear earlier –but of course if you spot a spelling error, or realize that a particular word is not the best word, there is no harm in pausing to make such a correction when you first see the need.

Now is the time to keep asking yourself questions like:

- What will my audience –my readers- make of this word, this sentence, this paragraph?
- Do I offer adequate support for this generalization?
- Is my point clear, and is it expressed effectively?

Put yourself in your reader's shoes ask yourself if readers will be aware of where they are going. You are inventing a skeptical reader, who in fact will be your helpful collaborator.

6. **Reread and revise the draft again**, asking yourself what your reader will make out of each sentence. Read your prose carefully, and try to hear it in the mind's ear. You might even read the draft aloud to yourself, or to a friend. Writing an essay is not the same thing

as having a conversation, of course, but you'll want to write the essay in voice that is natural to you.

Pay special attention to your *opening and closing paragraphs*. These two are especially difficult, but after you have drafted and revised the essay you will often find you can revise the beginning and the ending effectively. (A good opening paragraph is often the last thing the writer writes. It may well be as simple as an engaging statement of the thesis that you have at last come to recognize and develop.)

7. Make certain that the mechanics are according to the specifications. Here you are acting not so much as a writer but as an editor.

An author, in the heat of drafting material, may be indifferent to mechanical details, but an editor must be cool, detached, and finicky. When you are in the role of editor, you must tell yourself, as the author, to come down to earth and package the essay correctly. Margins, spacing, and page numbering should follow the instructor's requirements. All sources must be documented.

8. If possible, get a classmate or a friend to read your essay and make suggestions.

This representative of your audience should not rewrite the essay for you, but he or she can call your attention to paragraphs that need development, unclear organization, unconvincing arguments, awkward sentences, and even errors in punctuation and spelling.

9. Consider the reader's suggestions, and revised where you think necessary. If your reader finds some terms obscure, or an argument unsubstantiated, you will almost surely want to revise, clarifying the terms and providing evidence for the argument. As before, in the process of revising, try to imagine yourself as your own hypothetical –and skeptical- reader.

10. Reread the revised draft, revise it again – and again- as needed.

RULES for writers:
- You are not knocking off an assignment, you are writing an essay, engaging in a process that, first, will teach you, and second, will ultimately engage the interest of your readers.
- When you draft and especially when you revise an essay, keep your audience in mind. Tell them what they need to know, in an orderly way, and in language that they will understand and that will teach them.
- The words that you put on the page will convey an image of you to your reader; make sure that image is favorable.
- (Attributed to Truman Capote) Good writing is rewriting.
- You may or may not want to sketch a rough outline before drafting your essay, but you should certainly outline what you hope is your final draft, to see (a) if it is organized, and (b) if the organization will be evident to the reader.
- Acknowledge your resources: 1. If you quote directly and put the quoted words in quotation marks; 2. If you summarize or paraphrase someone's material, even though you do not retain one word of your source. 3. If you borrow a distinctive idea, even though the words and the concrete application are your own.
- Organize your essay so that your readers can easily follow the argument you use –the reasons you give- to support your thesis.

REVISING CHECKLIST FOR WRITERS

- Is my title engaging? Is it at least moderately informative and interesting?
- Does my introduction provide essential information (artist, work, topic, or approach of the essay)? Do I identify the subject of my essay and keep it in view?
- Does my paper have a thesis, a point? Do I state it soon enough, and keep it in view?
- Do I support my argument with sufficient persuasive detail?
- Is the organization reasonable? Does each point lead into the next without irrelevancies and without anticlimaxes? (Is the paper organized, and is the organization clear to the reader?)
- Is each paragraph unified by a topic sentence or a topic idea? Are there adequate transitions from one paragraph to the next?
- Is the final paragraph conclusive without being repetitive?
- Have I set forth my views effectively and yet not talked too much about myself?
- Does the essay fulfill the assignment (length, scope)?
- Is the tone appropriate? No sarcasm, no apologies, no condescension?
- Are there quotations adequately introduced, and are they accurate? Do they provide evidence and let the reader hear the author's voice, or do they merely add words to the essay?
- Have I kept in mind the needs of my audience, for instance, by defining unfamiliar terms or by briefly summarizing works or opinions that the reader may be unfamiliar with?
- Is documentation provided where necessary?
- Are the spelling and punctuation correct? Are other mechanical matters (such as margins, spacing, and citations) in correct form? Have I proofread carefully?
- Is the paper properly identified?

Taken from:

Barnet, Sylvan, William Burto, and William E. Cain. A Little Literature. New York: Pearson Longman, 2007.