

The following notes were written by Professor Richard Barickman of the Hunter College Department of English. They have been slightly edited, w/emphasis, etc.

Every essay that offers interpretations of literature is an effort to persuade, not to prove. Whether or not the reader of the essay finally agrees with the writer's main argument, **the essay is effective if it stimulates a thoughtful reconsideration of the work of literature under discussion.** This point may become clearer if we compare the interpretation of literature to the interpretation of the U.S. Constitution. The words of Hamlet and the words of the Constitution do not change, but people have always disagreed about what those words mean, and they will continue to disagree so long as both documents seem important. People make passionate and complicated arguments about each document in an effort to reach the truth. But though a person may reach a "workable" truth that convinces a number of people, he or she can never establish an interpretation that will convince everyone. In fact, most people who feel strongly about Hamlet or the Constitution change their opinions over the years. Just as Supreme Court decisions (which are interpretations of the Constitution) have often been in direct conflict with preceding decisions, judgments about literature change as cultural values and interests change. The attainment of a final, absolute truth doesn't seem likely or even possible. **Your aim in an essay about literature is to engage in a process of investigation, commitment, and persuasion which leads to a deeper understanding, a clearer and more intense engagement with a work of literature.**

**The most effective essays usually express the strong personal feelings of the writer. But the writer's main task in writing about literature is not to talk about personal feelings; rather, the writer communicates with the reader in such a way that the reader will be persuaded to see the text in a new and interesting way.** The writer should ordinarily deal with the ideas and emotions that the work of literature might arouse in any reader. It may be helpful to think of the reader as another person in the class who has read the text carefully but who may not have noticed the things that you have noticed... Therefore, any debatable issue is usually best presented through reference to **specific** words, scenes, situations in the text... Remember that **simple assertion of an idea, however powerfully stated, is usually not as persuasive as assertion followed by demonstration.**

**An essay of four to six pages (about 1000 to 1500 words) can ordinarily deal effectively with no more than one main controlling argument and two or three subtopics.** A topic such as "the interaction of characters in Hamlet" is too broad; "Hamlet's desire for revenge" is better focused; and "the self-destructive nature of Hamlet's desire for revenge" is probably best of all.

Because you can assume that your reader has also read the work of literature you are discussing, **you need not summarize the plot of a story or a play** or the basic situation of a poem unless you think there is a real problem in understanding this material. Instead, you should move directly to the specific topic your essay will pursue.

**Your main purpose in an essay about literature is to interpret rather than to describe.** You should, therefore, **include only those features of a work of literature that are necessary to support your specific interpretations...** Because you are writing about literature and perhaps about the responses that a number of readers might have to it, **you should focus attention directly on the work itself. This means that you should avoid, in most instances, direct references to yourself...** An essay presents the results of your efforts to understand a work of literature, **not the process you went through to reach that understanding.** [*Generally, refer to "the story," "the writing," "the author" (or his/her last name) and the narrative elements as the "actors in the writing, rather than "I" statements expressing your observations.*]

It is understandable that when we are faced with a complex and baffling work of literature--and when we know the work has been created by a particular person--we have an urge to know what the author really meant. But we usually know very little, if anything, about the lives and aesthetic ideals of the authors whose works we read, so **the author's intentions simply cannot be a part of many of our experiences with literature [unless the writing is clearly personal non-fiction writing].** And there are problems even when we do have a clear statement of the author's intention

or enough biographical information to make convincing speculations about probable motives. Works of literature often seem to suggest multiple patterns of significance rather than a single meaning that is easily condensed into a direct statement. So any paraphrase of the work's meaning, even the author's own paraphrase, may be limited and imperfect. And since creation in **any art form involves unconscious as well as conscious motives, the author's conscious intention is not necessarily a complete or, in some cases, even an accurate guide to the work's significance.** For these reasons, an interpretive essay of this kind must deal primarily with the work itself and the cultural conditions it refers to. If the work is coherent and carefully formed, it will usually reveal its significance through its own structures of language. Information about the author may supplement this primary source of meaning, but it is not ordinarily the key to meaning.

Most literature doesn't represent an author's life directly. It is often a form of pretending, like children's games or our own fantasy life. The urge to write may spring from a desire to explore experiences and emotions radically different from the author's personal experiences. (The authors of crime novels are not usually murderers.) So it is best to refer to the person who narrates the poem or story as the "narrator" or the "speaker" rather than the "author" unless you have some very definite knowledge that the author and the speaker are the same [as is usually the case in non-fiction writing].

Again, an essay is an attempt to put a portion of a work of literature into some coherent pattern of meaning (an individual's **own** interpretation), not primarily a record of the process of your own personal reading.

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**The following guidelines apply not only to essays about literature, but to any persuasive essay.**

As with any essay, a literature essay should have its own logical, coherent, progressive structure of argument. **The essay should announce its main subject in a clear and interesting way. The main idea in each paragraph should follow logically from the preceding paragraph's main ideas and should lead logically to the next paragraph. Transition words and phrases should make this logical progression clear to the reader.**

**An essay's introduction should arouse the reader's interest and sharply define the specific issues the essay will deal with. The introduction provides the writer's contract with the reader; it says, in effect, "This is what you can expect from this essay."** Be careful in your introduction to avoid vagueness or over-abstract generalities... The conclusion should return in some way to the main point of the essay. Yet a simple restatement often seems pat, schematic, or simply boring. Try to place the main issues in a different perspective or give them a different emphasis or even show how they might lead to further inquiry.