

WRITING ABOUT LITERATURE

What this handout is about...

This handout describes some steps for planning and writing papers about literature.

Demystifying the process

Writing an analysis of a piece of fiction can be a mystifying process. First, literary analyses (or papers that offer an interpretation of a story) rely on the assumption that stories must mean something. How does a story *mean* something? Isn't a story just an arrangement of characters and events? And if the author wanted to convey a meaning, wouldn't he or she be much better off writing an essay just telling us what he or she meant?

It's pretty easy to see how at least some stories convey clear meanings or morals. Just think about a parable like the prodigal son or a nursery tale about crying "wolf." But if the meanings were always as clear as they are in parables, who would really need to write a paper about them?

Interpretations of fiction, after all, would not be interesting if the meaning of the story were clear to everyone who reads it. The paper would become superfluous. Thankfully, the stories we're asked to interpret in our classes are a good bit more complicated than most parables. These stories can't be easily reduced to one specific meaning that every reader can agree upon, but instead they use characters, settings, and actions to illustrate issues that have no easy resolution. They show different sides of a problem, and they can raise new questions about a problem. Nothing against the parable, but if stories all led to clear lessons or meanings, there wouldn't be much reason to read them more than once, study them closely, or talk to others about the impressions they get from a story. In short, the stories we read in class have meanings that are arguable and complicated, and it's our job to sort them out.

It might seem that the stories do have specific meanings, and the instructor has already decided what that meaning is. Not true. Instructors can be pretty dazzling (or mystifying) with their interpretations, but that's because they have a lot of practice with stories and have developed a sense of the kinds of things to look for. Even so, the most well-informed professor rarely arrives at conclusions that someone else wouldn't disagree with--and often for good reasons. In fact, most professors are aware that their interpretations are debatable and actually love a good argument. But let's not go to the other extreme. To say that there is no *one* answer is not to say that anything we decide to say about a novel or short story is valid, interesting, or valuable. Interpretations of fiction are often opinions, but not all opinions are equal.

So what makes a valid and interesting opinion? A good interpretation of fiction will:

- avoid the obvious (in other words, arguing a conclusion that most readers could reach on their own from a general knowledge of the story)
- support its main points with strong evidence from the story
- use careful reasoning to explain how that evidence relates to the main points of the interpretation.

The following steps are intended as a guide through the difficult process of writing an interpretive paper that meets these criterion. Writing, however, tends to be a highly individual task, so adapt these suggestions to fit your own habits and inclinations.

1. BECOME FAMILIAR WITH THE TEXT.

There's just no substitute for a good general knowledge of your story. A good paper inevitably begins with the writer having a solid understanding of the work that he or she interprets. Being able to have the whole book, short story, or play in your head--at least in a general way--when you begin thinking through ideas will be a great help and will actually allow you to write the paper more quickly in the long run. It's even a good idea to spend some time just thinking about the story. Flip back through the book and consider what interests you about this piece of writing--what seemed strange, new, or important.

2. MAKE A LIST OF POTENTIAL TOPICS.

After reading your story, a topic may just jump out at you, or you may have recognized a pattern or identified a problem that you'd like to think about in more detail. What is a pattern or a problem?

A **pattern** can be the recurrence of certain kinds of imagery or events. Usually, repetitions of particular aspects of a story (similar events in the plot, similar description, even repetitions in particular words) tend to render those elements more conspicuous. Let's say I'm writing a paper on Mary Shelley's novel *Frankenstein*. In the course of reading that book, I keep noticing the author's use of biblical imagery: Victor Frankenstein anticipates that "a new species would bless me as its creator and source" (52) while the monster is not sure whether to consider himself as an Adam or a Satan. These details might help me interpret the way characters think about themselves and about each other, as well as allow me to infer what the author might have wanted her reader to think by using the Bible as a frame of reference. On another subject, I also notice that the book repeatedly makes reference to types of education. The book

routinely makes reference to books that its characters read and the different contexts in which learning takes place.

A **problem**, on the other hand, is something in the story that, to put it plainly, bugs you or that doesn't seem to add up. A character might act in some way that's unaccountable, a narrator may leave out what we think is

important information (or may focus on something that seems trivial), or a narrator or character offer an explanation for something that doesn't seem to make sense to us. Not all problems that we have with a story lead in interesting directions, but some definitely do and even seem to be important parts of the story. In *Frankenstein*, Victor works day and night to achieve his goal of bringing life to the dead, but once he realizes his goal, he is immediately repulsed by his creation and runs away. Why? Is there something wrong with his creation, something wrong with his goal in the first place, or something wrong with Victor himself? The book doesn't give us a clear answer, but seems to invite us to interpret this problem.

If nothing immediately strikes you as interesting or no patterns or problems jump out at you, don't worry. Just start making a list of whatever you remember from your reading regardless of how insignificant it may seem to you now. Consider a character's peculiar behavior or comments, the unusual way the narrator describes an event, or the author's placement of an action in an odd context. (Step 5 will cover some further elements of fiction that you might find useful at this stage as well.)

There's a good chance that some of these intriguing moments and oddities will relate to other points in the story, eventually revealing some kind of pattern and giving you potential topics for your paper. Also keep in mind that if you found something peculiar in the story you're writing about, chances are good that other people will have been perplexed by these moments in the story as well and will be interested to see how you make sense of it all. It's even a good idea to test your ideas out on a friend, a classmate, or an instructor since talking about your ideas will help you develop them and push them beyond obvious interpretations of the story. *And it's only by pushing those ideas that we can write a*

paper that raises interesting issues or problems and that offers creative interpretations related to those issues. As your ideas become more sophisticated, your analysis will likely make the story more meaningful and more rewarding for the rest of us.

3. SELECT A TOPIC WITH A LOT OF EVIDENCE.

If you're selecting from a number of possible topics, narrow down your list by identifying how much evidence or how many specific details you could use to investigate each potential issue.

Do this step just off the top of your head. Keep in mind that persuasive papers rely on ample evidence and that having a lot of details to choose from can also make your paper easier to write.

It might be helpful at this point to jot down all the events or elements of the story that have some bearing on the two or three topics that seem most promising. This can give you a more visual sense of how much evidence you will have to work with on each potential topic. It's on this activity that having a good knowledge of your story will come in handy and save you a lot of time. Don't launch into a topic without considering all the options first because you may end up with a topic that seemed promising initially but that only leads to a dead end.

4. WRITE OUT A WORKING THESIS.

Based on the evidence that relates to your topic--and what you anticipate you might say about those pieces of evidence--come up with a working thesis. Don't spend a lot of time composing this statement at this stage since it will probably change (and a changing thesis statement is a good sign that you're starting to say more interesting and complex things on your subject). At this point in my *Frankenstein* project, I've become interested in ideas on education that seem to appear pretty regularly, and I have a general sense that aspects of Victor's education lead to tragedy. Without considering things too deeply, I'll just write something like "Victor Frankenstein's tragic ambition was fueled by a faulty education."

5. MAKE AN EXPANDED LIST OF EVIDENCE.

Once you have a working topic in mind, skim back over the story and make a more comprehensive list of the details that relate to your point. For my paper about education in *Frankenstein*, I'll want to take notes on what Victor Frankenstein reads at home, where he goes to school and why, what he studies at school, what others think about those studies, etc. And even though I'm primarily interested in Victor's education, at this stage in the writing, I'm also interested in moments of education in the novel that don't directly involve this character. These other examples might provide a context or some useful contrasts that could illuminate my evidence relating to Victor. With this goal in mind, I'll also take notes on how the monster educates himself, what he reads, and what he learns from those he watches.

As you make your notes keep track of page numbers so you can quickly find the passages in your book again and so you can easily document quoted passages when you write without having to fish back through the book.

At this point, you want to include anything, *anything*, that might be useful, and you also want to avoid the temptation to arrive at definite conclusions about your topic. Remember that one of the qualities that makes for a good interpretation is that it avoids the obvious. You want to develop complex ideas, and the best way to do that is to keep your ideas flexible until you've considered the evidence carefully. Above all, you don't want to write a simplistic paper, and to avoid that, you need to be willing to challenge or expand your own thoughts. A good gauge of complexity is whether you feel you understand more about your topic than you did when you began (and even just reaching a higher state of confusion is a good indicator that you're treating your topic in a complex way).

When you jot down ideas, you can focus on the observations from the narrator or things that certain characters say or do. These elements are certainly important. It might help you come up with more evidence if you also take into account some of the broader components that go into making fiction, things like plot, point of view, character, setting, and symbols.

- **Plot** is the string of events that go into the narrative. Think

of this as the "who did what to whom" part of the story. Plots can be significant in themselves since chances are pretty good that some action in the story will relate to your main idea regardless of what that topic is. For my paper on education in *Frankenstein*, I'm interested in Victor's going to the University of Ingolstadt to realize his father's wish that Victor attend school where he could learn about another culture. Plots can also allow you to make connections between the story you're interpreting and some other stories, and those connections might be useful in your interpretation. For example, the plot of *Frankenstein*, which involves a man who desires to bring life to the dead and creates a monster in the process, bears some similarity to the ancient Greek story of Icarus who flew too close to the sun on his wax wings. Both tell the story of a character who reaches too ambitiously after knowledge and suffers dire consequences.

Your plot could also have similarities to whole groups of other stories, all having conventional or easily recognizable plots. These types of stories are often called **genres**. Some popular genres include the gothic (like *Frankenstein*), the romance (like *Wuthering Heights* or *Jane Eyre*), the detective story (any Sherlock Holmes story), the *bildungsroman* (this is just a German term for a novel that is centered around the development of its main characters, as in *Great Expectations* or *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*), and the novel of manners (a novel that focuses on the behavior and foibles of a particular class or social group as do all of Jane Austen's novels). These categories are often helpful in characterizing a piece of writing, but as with any attempt to categorize, this approach has its limitations. Many novels don't fit nicely into one genre and others seem to borrow a bit from a variety of different categories. For example, a reader could actually read *Frankenstein* as a *bildungsroman*, and given my own working thesis on education, I'm more interested in Victor's development than in relating *Frankenstein* to the gothic genre.

And just to complicate matters that much more, genre can sometimes take into account not only the type of plot

but the form the novelist uses to convey that plot. A story might be told in a series of letters (this is called an epistolary form or genre), in a sequence of journal entries, or in a combination of forms (*Frankenstein* is actually told as a journal included within a letter in a device called a framed narrative).

- These matters of form also introduce questions of **point of view**, that is, who is telling the story and what do they or don't they know. Can the reader trust that person to give an objective account, or does that narrator color the story with his or her own biases and interests?
- **Character** refers to the qualities assigned to the individual figures in the plot. Consider why the author assigns certain qualities to a character or characters and how any such qualities might relate to your topic. For example, a discussion of Victor Frankenstein's education might take into account aspects of his character that appear to be developed (or underdeveloped) by the particular kind of education he undertakes.

Victor tends to be ambitious, even compulsive about his studies, and I might be able to argue that his tendency to be extravagant leads him to devote his own education to writers who asserted grand, if questionable, conclusions.

- **Setting** is the context in which all of the actions take place. What is the time period, the location, the time of day, the season, the weather, the type of room or building? What is the general mood, and who is present? All of these elements can reflect on the story's events, and though the setting of a story tends to be less conspicuous than plot and character, setting still colors everything that's said and done within its context. If Victor Frankenstein does all of his experiments in "a solitary chamber, or rather a cell, at the top of the house, and separated from all the other apartments by a staircase" (53) we might conclude that there is something anti-social, isolated, and stale, maybe

even unnatural about his project and his way of learning.

Obviously, if you consider all of these elements, you'll probably have too much evidence to fit effectively into one paper. Your goal is merely to consider each of these aspects of fiction and include *only* those that are most relevant to your topic and most interesting to your reader. A good interpretive paper does not need to cover all elements of the story--plot, genre, narrative form, character, and setting. In fact, a paper that did try to say something about all of these elements would be unfocused. You might find that most of your topic could be supported by a consideration of character alone. That's fine. For my *Frankenstein* paper, I'm finding that my evidence largely has to do with the setting, evidence that could lead to some interesting conclusions that my reader probably hasn't recognized on his or her own.

5. SELECT YOUR EVIDENCE.

Once you've made your expanded list of evidence, decide which supporting details are the strongest. When you make these decisions, keep two points in mind: First, select the facts that bear the closest relation to your thesis statement.

Second, choose the pieces of evidence you'll be able to say the most about. *Readers tend to be more dazzled with your interpretations of evidence than with a lot of quotes from the book.* Select the details that will allow you to demonstrate your own reasoning skills and allow you to help the reader see the story in a different way.

6. REFINE YOUR THESIS.

Now that you have a more select list of evidence, you probably have a sharper idea about your main idea than you did before you considered all of your evidence closely. At this stage, then, go back to your working thesis and refine it so that it reflects your new understanding of your topic. This step and the previous step (selecting evidence) are actually best done at the same time since selecting your evidence and defining the focus of your paper

depend upon each other. As you consider refinements to your topic, also consider the scope of your project: how long is the paper supposed to be and what can you reasonably cover in a paper of that length? In rethinking the issue of education in *Frankenstein*, I realize that I can restrict the topics in a number of ways: education and culture (Victor's education abroad), education in the sciences as opposed to the humanities (the monster reads Milton, Goethe, and Plutarch), or differences in learning environments (e.g. independent study, university study, family reading). Since I think I found some interesting evidence in the settings that I can interpret in a way that will get my reader's attention, I'll take this last option and refine my working thesis about Victor's faulty education to something like this: "Victor Frankenstein's education in unnaturally isolated environments fosters his tragic ambition."

7. ORGANIZE YOUR EVIDENCE.

Once you have a clear thesis you can go back to your list of selected evidence and group all the similar details together. The ideas that tie these clusters of evidence together can then become the claims that you'll make in your paper. As you begin thinking about what claims you can make (i.e. what kinds of conclusion you can come to) *keep in mind that they should not only relate to all the evidence but should clearly support your thesis as well.*

Once you're satisfied with the way you've grouped your evidence and with the way that your claims relate to your thesis, you can begin to consider the most logical way to organize each of those claims. At this stage, some writers find detailed outlines helpful while others simply group their evidence in a less rigid way and let the finer points of organization take shape as they write. To support my thesis about *Frankenstein*, I've decided to group my evidence chronologically. I'll start with Victor's education at home, then discuss his learning at the University, and finally address his own experiments.

This arrangement will let me show that Victor was always prone to isolation in his education and that this tendency gets

stronger as he becomes more ambitious.

There are certainly other organizational options that might work better depending on the type of points I want to stress. I could organize a discussion of education by the various forms of education found in the novel (for example, education through reading, through classrooms, and through observation), by specific characters (education for Victor, the monster, and Victor's bride, Elizabeth), or by the effects of various types of education (those with pernicious, benevolent, or neutral effects).

8. INTERPRET YOUR EVIDENCE.

Avoid the temptation to load your paper with evidence from your story. *Each time you use a specific reference to your story, be sure to explain the significance of that evidence in your own words.* To get your readers' interest, you need to bring elements of the story to their attention that they wouldn't necessarily recognize on their own. So if you're quoting passages without interpreting them, you're not taking full advantage of your evidence or demonstrating your reasoning skills. In most cases, interpreting your evidence merely involves putting into your paper what is already in your head. Remember that we, as readers, are lazy--all of us. We don't want to have to figure out a writer's reasoning for ourselves; we want all the thinking to be done for us in the paper.

General Hints

The previous eight steps are intended to give you a sense of the tasks usually involved in writing a good interpretive paper. What follows are just some additional hints that might help you find an interesting topic and maybe even make the process a little less painful.

1. MAKE YOUR THESIS RELEVANT TO YOUR READER.

You'll be able to keep your reader's attention more easily if you pick a topic that relates to daily experience. Avoid writing a paper that only identifies a pattern in a story, but doesn't quite

explain why that pattern leads to an interesting interpretation. Identifying the biblical references in *Frankenstein* might provide a good start to a paper--Mary Shelley does use a lot of biblical allusions--but a good paper will also tell the reader why those references are meaningful. Identifying a pattern alone simply won't reward your reader, or yourself for that matter. So what makes an interesting paper topic? Simply put, it has to address issues that we can use in our own lives. Your thesis should be able to answer the brutal question "So what?" Does your paper tell your reader something relevant about the context of the story you're interpreting or about the human condition?

Some categories, like race, gender, and social class, are dependable sources of interest. This is not to say that all good papers necessarily deal with one of these issues. My thesis on education in *Frankenstein* does not. But a lot of readers would probably be less interested in reading a paper that traces the instances of water imagery than in reading a paper that compares male or female stereotypes used in a story or that takes a close look at the way an African-American or an Indian character is perceived by the other characters. Again, don't feel compelled to write on race, gender, or class. These are just some hot-button topics that concern a lot of readers. The main idea is that you ask yourself whether the topic you've selected connects with a major human concern, and there are a lot of options here (for example, issues that relate to economics, family dynamics, education, religion etc).

Also, don't assume that as long as you address one of these issues, your paper will be interesting. As mentioned in step 2, you need to address these big topics in a complex way. Doing this requires that you don't go into a topic with a preconceived notion of what you'll find. Be prepared to challenge your own ideas about what gender, race, or class mean in a particular text.

2. SELECT A TOPIC OF INTEREST TO YOU.

Though you may feel like you have to select a topic that sounds like something your instructor would be interested in, don't overlook the fact that you'll be more invested in your paper and probably get more out of it if you make the topic something pertinent to yourself. Pick a topic that might allow you to learn about yourself and what you find important.

Of course, your topic can't entirely be of your choosing. We're always at the mercy of the evidence that's available to us. For example, your interest may really be in political issues, but if you're reading *Frankenstein*, you might face some difficulties in finding enough evidence to make a good paper on that kind of topic. If, on the other hand, you're interested in ethics, philosophy, science, psychology, religion, or even geography you'll probably have more than enough to write about and find yourself in the good position of having to select only the best pieces of evidence.

3. MAKE YOUR THESIS SPECIFIC.

The effort to be more specific almost always leads to a thesis that will get your reader's attention, and it also separates you from the crowd as someone who challenges ideas more and looks into a topic more deeply. I'm banking that a paper about education in *Frankenstein* will probably not get my reader's attention as much as a more specific topic about the impact of the learning environment on the main character. My readers may have already thought to some extent about ideas of education in the novel, if they have read it, but the chance that they have thought through something more specific like the educational environment is slimmer.

