

Thoughts on composing an analytical essay on literature . . .

I. Primary considerations

- A. Present a *specific* argument that is concise and that you can make using material from the relevant text(s). For this consideration, read through the file [Creating a Thesis Statement](#) on my website. The one or two sentences that form your thesis should appear early in your paper—in the first or second paragraph.
- B. Enrich the reader's journey through your argument with passages that demonstrate your individual "writer's voice," that bring some evidence of your personal involvement with the text to the reader. This does not mean that you should be overly familiar in tone or use inappropriate slang, but feel free to use the first-person pronoun—or not.

II. A few notes on structure: Your essay should have a clear beginning, middle, and end. Each of these parts may consist of any number of paragraphs. This structure should allow you to bring your reader into your topic, expand your reader's knowledge of the topic, and leave the reader feeling that his or her time has been well spent.

- A. The beginning: There are no rules, no formulas for this task. But you must consider your audience carefully. Mr. Steele is not Mr. Shafer; Miss Rabinowitz is not Mr. Davidson. Ideally, you compose for a much wider audience, including that of your peers. When you have extra time to put voice into your opening, try to do so. Some variations of effective openings include the following:

- 1. A direct quotation from the work (or a similar work) *that is relevant* to your thesis. In your opening, you should include an analysis of that quotation in light of your thesis. A randomly selected quotation from a book of quotations is not appropriate for this.
- 2. Some information about the author's life and times *that is relevant* to the work itself and/or your thesis.
- 3. Some general background information concerning the setting, theme, or central conflict of the work.
- 4. A more personal introduction in which you relate some specific incident out of your own experience (actual or observed) to the work and/or to your thesis.

III. The middle: Here is the heart of your paper. It's important that your reader be able to discern readily the different parts of your argument. The thrust of each separate paragraph should be clear and your sentence structure varied. Appropriately use transitional words and phrases and back up any assertions with evidence from the text. Be sure to not only edit, but revise your work. At the very least it needs to be transactional, but ideally you can take to a level where it is poetic. *Remember, if you have been asked a specific question, be sure you answer it.*

IV. The end: Above all, do not merely restate what you have just told me. Such an ending, in a brief paper, insults the reader and wastes ink. If you have run out of anything original to say once the middle portion is over, end your paper. Ideally, an ending should answer the eternal questions that every reader asks (whether he or she admits it or not)—“So what? Why have you taken up my valuable time with this document? What lessons, connected perhaps in some way to your main argument, am I to learn from the literary work you have examined?”

V. A Summing up

A. You are learning to become a critic. W.H. Auden has done a splendid job of summarizing the task of such a writer:

B. *“What is the function of a critic? So far as I am concerned, he can do me one or more of the following services:*

- 1. Introduce me to authors or works of which I was hitherto unaware.*
- 2. Convince me that I have undervalued an author or a work because I had not read them carefully enough.*
- 3. Show me relations between works of different ages and cultures, which I could never have seen for myself because I do not know enough and never shall.*
- 4. Give a “reading” of a work that increases my understanding of it.*
- 5. Throw light upon the process of artistic “Making.”*
- 6. Throw light upon the relation of art to life, to science, economics, ethics, religion, etc.”*

—From *The Dyer's Hand* (New York, 1963, pg. 8-9)