

LITERARY ESSAYS

The field of literature is rich with conversations about books and their authors, stories and themes, and an ever-changing literary landscape of the world. Writing an essay on literature is your chance to participate in those conversations!

Remember that writing is a process. To write a well organized essay, it helps to break the assignment down into manageable chunks: brainstorming, completing an outline, writing a first draft, and revising.

Writing is like other jobs or skills: it takes practice. There are also many possible approaches. As you gain more experience writing, you will learn what works best for you. In the meantime, here are some basic steps to break down the assignment, and make sure you're going through the necessary steps.

The Basic Steps

Get comfortable with the assignment.

Read over the assignment. Make sure you understand what the assignment or question is asking of you. Choose a topic (if you are given a choice) and if anything is unclear, reach out to your professor for clarification.

Tips for choosing a topic: If you are faced with several topics to choose from, how do you choose? There can be countless themes and arguments for even a single short story or book. What makes a good topic choice?

Go with one that:

- you have the most to say about
- you are the most interested in

Brainstorm ideas

Don't just launch into a draft of your essay once you have chosen your topic. It's important to start generating ideas. Brainstorming is one of the most crucial steps in finding out what aspects of the topic interest you. You should also take a close look at the text you'll be talking about for your thesis and supporting examples.

Remember, you're trying to pull ideas out of the text. You want to go beyond the details your professor talked about in class, and come up with your own things to say, including your own supporting evidence.

Tips on primary and secondary sources: When writing a literary essay, there are two types of sources



you can use to back up your ideas: primary and secondary. The primary source is the piece of literature you are writing about. For example, if you're asked to write an essay about the portrayal of women in *Jane Eyre*, then *Jane Eyre* is your primary source. Secondary sources are texts or materials that other people have already created about the primary text; some examples include books, articles in academic journals, documentary films, and websites. Secondary sources are often found through the Humber Library and its database.

Formulate a thesis

Once you have a list of ideas to write about, and evidence to support your ideas, you are ready to write your thesis. At this stage, your goal is to create a concise statement of your argument. As you conduct research for the essay, the evidence may cause you to change your original argument. That's okay; your essay will be stronger if you allow yourself to be flexible, rather than carving your thesis in stone when you start writing your outline or first draft. Your thesis should bend to your evidence and not the other way around.

However, the more focused you can make your thesis at this stage, the more focused your outline and first draft will be. There are some steps you can take to help you focus your thesis at this stage:

Tips on the thesis: try the "So What" check

Once you have a preliminary thesis, it is important to decide whether it is a strong thesis to write your essay on. To do this, ask yourself, –So what?

For example, if you are asked to write an essay about images in the book *Barnacle Love*, your first attempt at a thesis might look something like this: Images of fish occur frequently. This is a very shallow exploration of the topic of fish imagery.

To develop your thesis further, try asking, –So what? In other words, –Why bother with the fish images? What purpose do they serve in the book? What are the wider implications? After questioning the thesis, brainstorm some ideas that could answer the –So what? question and be sure the So what? questions can be answered with support from your text. With time and consideration, your thesis may evolve into: Images of fish occur frequently in *Barnacle Love*, representing the strength of Manuel's ties to Portugal.

You can take the essay even further by examining what the image is doing in the book, and then extending that role to a discussion of a larger context in the world the text exists in. For example: Images of fish occur in both subtle and obvious ways in *Barnacle Love*, suggesting the levels of nuance in Manuel's attitude towards Portugal and the complexity possible in a person's relationship with his homeland after emigrating.

An effective strategy is to start writing a draft of your essay with a more developed thesis like one of the two above. By the end of the draft, you may have developed ideas about the wider implications of what the book is saying about the world around it. You can then incorporate these ideas into your thesis and revise your essay based on your new, strong thesis.

Create an outline

An outline is your chance to organize the brainstormed ideas and your supporting research into a paper that proves your thesis. However, remember that writing is a process, and your essay



may change as you move from the outline, to the first draft and through subsequent drafts. The outline isn't meant to be something you have to follow word for word: it's more like a map of a possible route you can take. However, you may find better routes once you're actually researching and writing.

Double-check your thesis

Once you have a complete outline, look back at your thesis and ask yourself if your arguments still support it. If the thesis and outline don't match up, this is a good opportunity for you to reassess your thesis and outline and revise either if necessary. Revising your thesis or outline is not a failure, it is a chance to focus your paper into the strongest version of itself!

Remember, don't be afraid to:

- Brainstorm any ideas that come to you
- Create a first draft before submitting a final draft
- Revise your thesis to strengthen it
- Revise your essay, focusing on aspects such as organization and structure, development of ideas, connections, and logic
- Proofread your essay for grammar, spelling and punctuation



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