A GUIDE TO WRITING ABOUT LITERATURE AT CALTECH

This resource provides detailed guidelines for writing essays about literature in Caltech courses, along with specific examples taken from prizewinning essays written by Caltech students. It was created through a collaborative effort between the Hixon Writing Center and English and comparative literature faculty members at Caltech. While you may encounter many different kinds of assignments about literature in your humanities courses, this handout focuses on providing guidelines for assignments in which you are asked to write interpretive essays about literature.

TYPES OF PAPER ASSIGNMENTS

Before you begin writing an essay about literature, be sure to understand what the prompt is asking you to do. Reread the prompt several times to identify what kind of questions it raises: Are you being asked to perform a close reading (see next section below) of a single poem, compare multiple short stories, or connect an author's work to a larger historical context? Pay attention to the verbs your instructor uses. Are they asking you to "reflect," "compare," or "analyze"? Does the prompt indicate that you should develop an original argument or focus on describing something? If you find any part of the assignment confusing, consult your instructor and/or the Hixon Writing Center staff.

Common Types of Essay Assignments
Assignments for essays about literature can vary widely, depending on the level of the course and the instructor's goals. Here are a few categories you might encounter:

- **Close Reading Analyses:** These essays focus on illuminating how specific literary devices—such as imagery, metaphor, or narrative structure—function within carefully selected portions of a text. A close reading might hinge on analyzing just a few lines or paragraphs to reveal larger implications.
- **Comparative Essays:** In assignments that ask you to compare two or more texts, the goal is often to illuminate how authors approach similar themes or stylistic choices in different ways. Your central argument should highlight a meaningful connection or contrast that merits detailed examination and makes a larger point.
- **Contextual or Historical Analyses:** For these essays, you might draw on historical, biographical, or cultural contexts that inform the text's meaning. The key is to show how that context deepens or reshapes an interpretation of the literary work, rather than simply listing historical facts.
- **Argumentative Essays Focused on a Single Work:** Some prompts might ask you to trace the development of a theme or character across a novel or other

longer literary work. The aim is to propose a unifying insight, perhaps about recurring narrative patterns or evolving thematic concerns.

- **Lens Essays:** In this type of essay, you might be asked to use one text as a "lens" to illuminate or interpret another. Your central argument should show what one text reveals about another.
- **Theoretical Approaches:** In some classes, you may be asked to apply a specific theoretical lens (such as feminist, critical race, postcolonial, or queer theory) to a literary text.

Understanding each type of assignment allows you to tailor your argument and evidence to the unique demands of the prompt. Regardless of the essay's form, the challenge remains the same: articulate a focused central argument grounded in the text itself, then support it with compelling evidence and clear reasoning

CLOSE READING

Close reading is one of the most fundamental skills you'll be asked to develop in literature courses. The practice of close reading allows you to examine in detail how a text's language, structure, and context come together to produce meaning. As John Guillory explains, close reading, in the broadest sense, is the art of "reading a piece of writing with enhanced care or attention" (5). In doing so, literary scholars attend to the details of texts—such as imagery, themes, formal qualities, and symbols, to name just a few—in order to make arguments about the meaning of these texts. Close reading requires you to slow down and focus on relatively brief selections from a text (sometimes just a few lines from a poem or a paragraph from a novel) and then to analyze key elements such as diction, structure, tone, and narrative point of view.

Although it can be tempting to approach a text with an eye solely to plot or thematic summary, close reading goes beyond summary by drawing out the significance of specific features of the language and formal qualities in the text. **Think of a literary text as a highly complex system of language that creates meaning. Your task is to identify important details, patterns, or tensions in this system of language, then explore how they work together—and even against one another—to create the text's overall meaning.** See the example at the end of the "Writing Paragraphs of Textual Analysis" section below to get a sense of how this method looks in practice.

Why should you practice close reading? First, "close reading" is the main disciplinary method used to support written arguments about literature. As literary scholar Jonathan Kramnick explains, close reading is the literary scholar's version of the scientific method, an agreed upon way of grounding disciplinary truth claims about the meaning of literary texts (24-25). Thus, proficiently using close reading to support your arguments will contribute to successful essays. Second, close reading is an adaptable skill that will prepare you to be a better reader and thinker beyond the literature classroom. Practicing close reading sensitizes us to noticing the choices all kinds of writers make about language. Skilled close readers will be more likely to notice, for example, that the use of the active voice ("NIH Cancels Project to Fund Cancer Research" or passive

voice (“Plans to Fund Cancer Research Project are Cancelled”) in news headlines shapes our understanding of current events.

Considering Genre
Working with diverse literary genres might mean attending to different features of these complex systems of language. Analyzing a Shakespearean sonnet, for example, involves paying attention to meter, rhyme, and figurative language—features that will likely be less important in a modern short story. Analyzing a novel might require you to consider narrative voice, setting, and character development over many pages. No matter what the key areas for attention, the fundamental goal remains the same: to show how smaller-scale elements of a literary work (like an author’s unusual word choices or a sudden shift in narrative perspective) contribute to the overall meaning of that text.

A major part of the learning you will do in most literature courses focuses on how to close read in specific genres that are situated within unique historical and literary contexts. As you gain more experience, you will refine your approach to close reading different genres in varied contexts, learning to notice the subtle features of a text. This process often involves multiple re-readings, careful annotation, and deliberate questioning of how one way of presenting something in language (e.g., a character, a setting description, or an idea) creates a different experience for a reader than another way of presenting similar information. By engaging in this process, you prepare yourself to craft an interpretation that is grounded in close reading rather than unsupported opinion.

Considering Historical Context
When reading literature written in earlier eras, it is important to keep in mind the cultural, social, or political conditions in which a text was produced. This awareness will shape how you interpret certain phrases or events. If a poem was written in the early 20th century, for example, you might consider how the literary or cultural conditions of that era affected what the text meant to its original audience. For a novel set in another country, understanding the local history may make visible otherwise obscure features of the text. Many literature professors will provide this relevant historical context during lectures or class discussions. (Note that a quick trip to Wikipedia will not be sufficient to grasp the nuances of a given historical period, and some professors may expressly prohibit certain kinds of outside research, so be familiar with the ground rules each course sets for your reading.) Whether you focus primarily on textual features or bring in historical context, your analysis should always return to the text itself.

Because the meaning of words changes over time, it’s a good idea to make sure you understand the meaning of particular words when interpreting texts from the past—particularly texts written prior to the 20th century. When working with texts originally written in English, consult the *Oxford English Dictionary* to confirm that you have the right meaning in mind. Author-specific glossaries as *Shakespeare’s Words* and the *Emily Dickinson Lexicon* are also valuable resources.

ENGAGING WITH LITERARY TEXTS

Engagement with literary texts begins long before you start writing. In contrast to the "passive reading" you might do when reading purely for pleasure, active close reading helps you understand how an author's specific words, images, and structural choices shape the work's meaning. Annotation (i.e., marking up a text) is one of the most straightforward ways to practice active close reading. Actions such as underlining key phrases, circling repeated words, and jotting quick reactions in the margins not only aid comprehension but also provide material to draw on when you craft your own argument or interpretation.

However, it's important not to miss out on the pleasurable aspects of reading literature. This is why we recommend what Keith Hjortshoj calls "reading with two minds." To read with two minds is to read simultaneously for appreciation and critical understanding. (38). A well-developed, personalized notetaking system will allow you to do both. Of course, this takes practice, and you may find it challenging to read with two minds if you are new to reading literature critically.

Active Reading, Annotation, and Notetaking Strategies
Active reading can happen in various ways, including through margin notes, digital annotation, sticky notes, color-coded highlighting, or notetaking systems. The goal is to create a conversation between yourself and the text. You might mark places where the language feels surprising or highlight patterns that contribute to larger themes. Some students might find it helpful to keep a reading journal in which they summarize a chapter or scene, then list observations, questions, and possible interpretations. What you're used to doing when reading other kinds of texts—like textbooks or journal articles—might not work here, and it will take some trial and error to find an active reading method that works for you.

Annotation will generally make you better prepared for class, and it is especially important if you plan to discuss a specific element of the text in your paper. It allows you to revisit and evaluate your first impressions more critically. When you have access to good notes and a set of page numbers for key ideas and evidence, the drafting process becomes much simpler. Quoting and paraphrasing the text accurately are easier when you've already gathered exact phrasing or line numbers. Active reading streamlines the writing process by allowing you to find that evidence more efficiently. It is essential to note that this is true because annotation necessitates critical thinking and engagement with the text. When you review others' annotations, you see some evidence of how they are thinking. This can be generative for your own thoughts, but this is not a substitute for spending time doing your own original thinking.

Strategies for Textual Analysis
Textual analysis moves you from noticing details to explaining how those details work together. For example, you might observe that certain words recur throughout a poem or that a short story contains oddly specific descriptions of background scenery. Once you notice these patterns, you can start to ask why the author emphasizes them. This

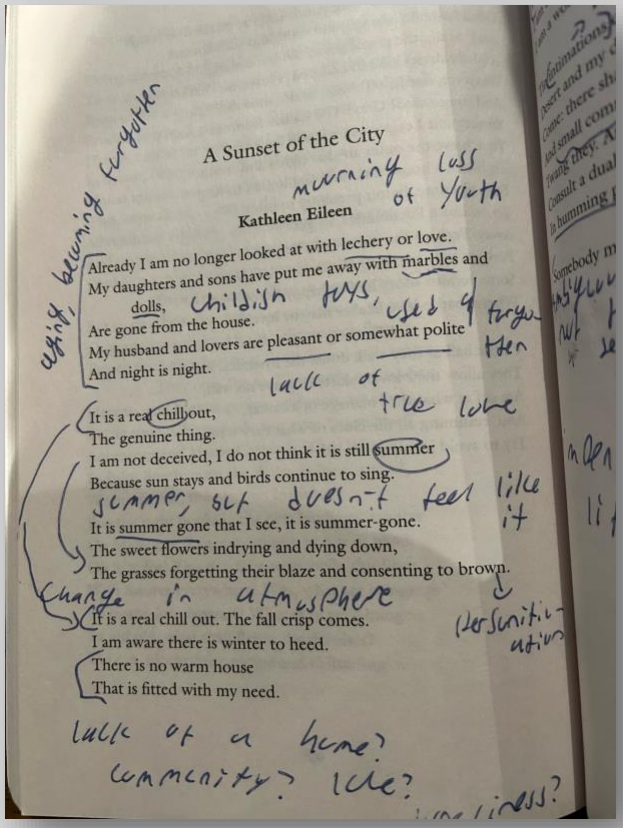
line of questioning often leads to a deeper investigation of theme, character, or structure.

In addition to identifying repeated themes, pay attention to literary devices:

- **Metaphor and simile:** What comparisons does the author draw, and what effect do they have on your understanding of a character, idea, or event?
- **Symbolism**: Are certain objects or settings used repeatedly, possibly pointing to an underlying meaning?
- **Tone and diction:** How does the language feel—formal, colloquial, abstract, urgent—and how does that shape your impression of the narrator or the text's message?
- **Structure and pacing:** Is the text organized chronologically, or does it jump in time? Does the narrative linger on certain moments while rushing through others? Are paragraphs or stanzas short, long, or highly variable?
- **Point of view:** Does the text adopt a first-, second-, or third-person point of view? How does that influence the way we understand it?

The example below shows what a well-annotated page of poetry might look like. Remember that there is no one way to do it. Find a system that works for you!

Example



A Sunset of the City

Kathleen Eileen

Already I am no longer looked at with lechery or love.
My daughters and sons have put me away with marbles and
dolls,
Are gone from the house.
My husband and lovers are pleasant or somewhat polite
And night is night.

It is a real chill out,
The genuine thing.
I am not deceived, I do not think it is still summer
Because sun stays and birds continue to sing.
It is summer gone that I see, it is summer-gone.
The sweet flowers indrying and dying down,
The grasses forgetting their blaze and consenting to brown.
It is a real chill out. The fall crisp comes.
I am aware there is winter to heed.
There is no warm house
That is fitted with my need.

Gwendolyn Brooks poem annotated by Caltech student Parker Thompson

FORMULATING A CENTRAL ARGUMENT

Most of the assignments in literature courses you will encounter at Caltech will require you to develop a strong central argument. Instructors may refer to a central argument by different names, such as “argument,” “thesis” or “central claim,” but the idea is usually similar. It is the statement that ties your entire essay together and gives your reader a clear sense of what you plan to prove, answer, or explore. To begin to develop an argument, go back to your annotations of the text and notes from class discussions and start looking for patterns.

Strong central arguments share a few important qualities:

- **Original to You:** While some assignments might ask you to consult secondary sources or existing scholarship for support, a compelling central argument typically emerges from your own critical engagement with the text rather than simply reproducing someone else’s argument.

- **Specific:** Broad assertions are rarely arguable, and academic readers value specific claims. Early in the writing process, your argument may not be specific because you have not yet fully figured out what you want to argue. For example, a writer might start out with a notion that a set of poems is highly confusing and difficult to navigate as a reader. Through further thinking and writing, the writer might reach the insight that the poems lack narrative continuity, which is what makes them feel so confusing. This specification of insight is valued by readers in fields that write about literature.
- **Arguable:** A central argument is not just a factual observation ("This poem utilizes hyperbole") or a list of themes ("The novel deals with memory, guilt, and redemption"). Accurate descriptions of a text help establish an argument, but the argument itself should interpret the text. This means that it makes a claim about the text's meaning that reasonable readers could conceivably debate.
- **Textually Grounded:** Successful arguments emerge from unique observations about the text. Tying your interpretations to specific textual details not only strengthens your argument but also demonstrates you've read closely.
- **Appropriately Scaled:** A good central argument should be scaled to the length of the paper. You are likely to write relatively short papers (4 – 5 pages) in most courses, and students' early drafts of arguments are often too ambitious to be convincingly proven in a short paper. This can be due to a writer's anxiety that they will run out of things to say if their thesis is too specific, or sometimes to a feeling that they want to showcase all the ideas they have. In most papers, an academic reader prefers that you dive deeper into fewer ideas instead of pursuing breadth. If you have four or five areas of focus in a short paper, consider if you could reduce it to two or three and go into more depth about each. If you're writing a longer paper, the scope of your argument can expand accordingly.
- **Concise:** A sign that you understand your own argument well is when you can present it concisely and clearly to your reader. Typically, in a short paper, your core argument should be presented in two to three very clear sentences.

In the example below, former Caltech student Crystal Liang concisely states an arguable, specific central argument that is grounded in the relevant texts and appropriately scaled to the length of assignment.

Example

In contrast with the bewilderment of "Snow Storm," "Autumn," and "The Flood," Clare's "Remembrances" demonstrates a mastery over the speaker's environment through a sense of narrative continuity and cognitive order. Through the conspicuous absence of these elements, the later nature poems reflect the state of mind of an untethered individual who has not only become estranged from the past but has also lost the ability to make sense of the present.

From McClure Prize-winner Crystal Liang's "Recollected Sanity"

WRITING AN INTRODUCTION

The introduction of an essay about literature sets the stage for the entire essay, so it's crucial to provide the reader with enough context and establish a clear central argument about the text (or texts) in question. By "introduction," we mean the writing that comes before the essay's body paragraphs, which will vary in length from project to project. In a shorter essay, the introduction may be one paragraph; in a longer essay or thesis project, it might be two or more. Here are some elements that help create a strong introduction:

- **Opening sentence:** Avoid overly broad opening sentences that add little value to your introduction, such as "Throughout modern history, there have been debates about the nature and importance of marriage." These may help you get started writing, but you can delete them later because your reader will not get much out of them. A better opening sentence might be, "The marriage plot was immensely popular among 18th-century novel writers." This is still a general statement of fact, but it provides a clearer sense of where this paper is headed.
- **Context:** Provide your reader with enough background to understand the significance of your argument or the text you're discussing, but not so much that they feel they are wading through masses of summary before arriving at your argument (the main event). If you're writing about a specific novel, you might briefly note where and when it was published or mention an essential literary feature of the text. If your essay will center on a particular character's psychology, identify that character and why their portrayal matters. Look for guidance from the assignment about the audience for the paper as you consider how much and what kind of context that reader may need in order to understand your essay.
- **Transition to Your Focus:** A direct, logical transition from the broader context to the specific issue or aspect of the text you'll be examining helps ensure that your central argument feels natural and not abrupt. This transition can take the form of a focused question, a brief comparison, or a key observation that narrows your topic.
- **Central Argument:** As we explain above, a strong central argument is not just a statement of topic but a specific, debatable argument that your paper will support with evidence from the text. For example, rather than simply declaring that "Scenes of domesticity appear in Melville's *Moby-Dick*," you might, as former Caltech student Grace Liu does in the example below, argue that "By recreating domesticity on the Pequod and contrasting Ishmael with Ahab, Melville arrives at an important conclusion: domesticity persists even in masculine spheres and repeated attempts to eradicate it only result in disaster."
- **Scope and Limitations.** Especially when dealing with a long text or a complex topic, clarify the scope of your argument. Let the reader know if you plan to discuss only the first half of the novel, or if you are focusing on a particular motif. Being explicit about what your paper does and does not

address indicates that your argument is carefully constructed rather than overly broad.

A well-written introduction, like the one below, should offer a concise preview of the argument to come. The goal is to show the reader what you plan to discuss and why it matters.

Example

In the 19th century, American society expected men and women to occupy entirely different worlds. Gender norms dictated that women belonged at home, in the domestic realm, where they performed routine household tasks and provided comfort and emotional support to their family. On the other hand, these norms encouraged men to pursue adventure and passion, and ideals of masculinity revolved around power and individuality. On the surface, the setting of a whaling boat is the perfect realization of the masculine sphere, as a group of men leave the domestic shore to travel the world, while reaping economic benefit and asserting power over nature by killing the seemingly indomitable sperm whale. This is the picture that Herman Melville paints at first in his 1851 novel *Moby-Dick*, in which the main character Ishmael embarks with the crew of the Pequod to escape domesticity and takes part in Captain Ahab's quest to kill the white whale. However, as Ishmael discusses his daily life, it becomes apparent that even in the absence of women, homosocial interactions on the ship recreate a new type of domesticity. Ishmael embraces the unexpected appearance of domesticity on the Pequod, which enables him to survive the disastrous encounter with Moby-Dick. This contrasts the tragic fate of Captain Ahab, who rejects all opportunities to take part in domestic affairs in favor of pursuing his individual quest to kill Moby-Dick. By recreating domesticity on the Pequod and contrasting Ishmael with Ahab, Melville arrives at an important conclusion: domesticity persists even in masculine spheres and repeated attempts to eradicate it only result in disaster.

From Hallett Smith Prize-winner Grace Liu's "The Reproduction of Homosocial Domesticity Aboard the Pequod in Melville's Moby Dick"

WRITING PARAGRAPHS OF TEXTUAL ANALYSIS

Once you've presented your readers with an introduction that sets the stage by providing relevant context and a clear central argument, it's time to support that argument by analyzing the text(s) through close reading.

Every body paragraph should, in some way, work to support your essay's central argument. In certain types of essays, some body paragraphs may support your central claim by offering historical context; however, in most cases, the majority of your paragraphs will use close reading of textual evidence to advance your central argument. Presenting evidence from the text(s), then carefully analyzing it to show how it supports your claim, ensures that each paragraph serves a clear purpose.

If a piece of evidence doesn't reinforce your main point—or if its connection to the main point feels vague—consider reworking that paragraph to preserve a tight, logical flow or possibly setting that paragraph aside. Not all good ideas you have about the text will fit well into your paper. Thoughtful organization and consistent reference to your essay's central claim keep the reader focused on what your argument ultimately aims to show.

When developing body paragraphs of textual analysis, a clear topic sentence lets your reader know how each paragraph supports your central claim. A strong topic sentence sets the stage for the evidence you're about to present and explains why it matters. If your claim involves the recurring significance of a particular image, for instance, your topic sentence should connect that image directly to the argument, rather than treating it as an isolated observation.

Incorporating Textual Evidence and Quoting Strategically
To write effective paragraphs of textual evidence, you need to be strategic not only about which passages you quote but also how you present them. Here are some general principles to follow:

- **Quote With a Purpose:** When selecting quotations, choose passages that genuinely advance your argument or that reveal something crucial about the text. If you present a long block quote or multiple lines from the text, follow it up with detailed commentary that unpacks key words or phrases.
- **Contextualize Each Quotation:** Do not assume your reader will understand a quote's relevance automatically, even when they are familiar with the text. Before quoting, set up the scene or speaker. After quoting, explain exactly how it supports the point you're making. Introduce the evidence with phrasing that highlights your argument rather than simply stating "He says" or "Here is a quote." This guidance informs your reader how the quotation strengthens your central claim.
- **Integrate Quotations Smoothly:** Aim to mesh quoted material with your own sentence structures. Avoid placing a quotation as a standalone sentence, and ensure that any grammatical adjustments—like changing verb tense or clarifying a pronoun—are clearly indicated with brackets. If a passage is too long or contains unrelated details, use ellipses to trim it, but do so fairly: don't omit points that might undermine your argument. Purdue OWL offers several pages of guidance on technical aspects of bringing quotations into writing.
- **Use Quotations Strategically—Not as Filler:** Each piece of textual evidence should perform real analytical work in your analysis. Avoid using quotes to summarize the text. If you find yourself dropping in a quote without following it up, pause to ask whether the quote is necessary. Particularly long block quotations can interrupt the flow of your essay, so only include them when the full passage is essential to illustrating your point.
- **Position Quotations Mindfully in Your Paragraphs:** In general, avoid beginning or ending a paragraph with a quotation. Paragraph openings and closings have a strong rhetorical effect, so reserve them for your own voice. If

you do place a quotation near the end of a paragraph, be sure to provide enough commentary afterward to connect it clearly to your argument.

Simply including evidence from the text isn't enough; you must also interpret what that evidence means. A good rule of thumb is that your analysis of a quotation should be at least as long as (and ideally longer than) the quote itself. This analysis is where you explain what you notice in the author's language or structure and connect it directly to your central argument. Your goal is not only to confirm that a certain detail exists in the text, but also to illustrate why it matters for your central claim.

In the example body paragraph below, note how former Caltech student Shrishti Pankaj Kulkarni quotes selectively from *Beowulf* and interweaves her own interpretive close readings to show how this evidence supports her argument.

Example

The heroes and the kings therefore serve as complements to one another when it comes to the distribution of treasure. A cycle is established between heroes receiving gifts from kings, passing those gifts to their own rulers, and then the rulers further passing down the gifts to other heroes. The reader sees this when Beowulf gives away some of his gifts, presenting the hilt of the giant's sword and Grendel's head to Hrothgar, as "a token of triumph and we tender it to you" (1654), as well as some of Hrothgar's gifts to Hygd and Hygelac, "he presented Hygd with a gorget…and three horses" (2172 - 4). In this way, heroes and kings form a complementary dynamic of treasure distribution. It is also interesting to note that the gifts that heroes give to kings are often trophies taken from their exploits. After Beowulf defeats Grendel, and Grendel's mother comes back for revenge, she is said to have "snatched their trophy, / Grendel's bloodied hand" (1302 - 3). This shows how the people viewed what Beowulf had taken from Grendel in battle as a "trophy," where the caesura also emphasizes their possession of it. Beowulf repeats the act of trophy-taking when "Beowulf cut the corpse's [Grendel's] head off" (1590), in what could be seen as an unnecessarily gruesome turn of events after already decapitating Grendel's mother, which highlights the extent a hero will go in order to "take" from a battle. This distinction is important because while treasure does flow through the cycle of heroes and kings, trophies—which are associated more with the active act of taking rather than just receiving—only travel from the hero to the king. This marks heroes as the ones more actively involved, which manifests in the kingly code regarding conflict intervention too, as will be explored further. Moreover, a significant difference between treasure and trophies is that treasure can be shared with the people, while trophies serve as a marker of one person's pride only—the hero's. Thus, we see another manifestation of pride marking a difference between the power dynamic of heroes and kings in the acts of giving and receiving.

From Hallett Smith Prize-winner Shrishti Pankaj Kulkarni's "Beowulf and the Moral Dilemma Between Kingship and Heroism"

ESSAY ORGANIZATION: DEVELOPING AN ARGUMENT

A well-organized essay helps your reader follow the progression of your argument. Although the best structure for a paper will vary depending on your assignment, clarity is always key. Ask yourself how each point or section relates to the central argument and whether the order of these points makes sense. If you find yourself explaining a concept before you've introduced the context that makes it meaningful, consider rearranging sections to lead the reader in a logical sequence from premise to conclusion.

Common Essay Structures
Different assignments call for different organizational approaches. Here are a few you might consider:

- **Chronological:** If you're analyzing a text where the order of events shapes a key element (such as shifting character perspectives or developments in a plot), a chronological structure can help you trace how meaning evolves across that text.
- **Thematic:** This approach groups related ideas or recurring themes together so that you can explore each theme in depth. It can be especially effective if you want to compare how an author treats a particular concept across multiple scenes or works.
- **Comparative:** When writing about more than one text, you may organize your essay around similarities and differences. For instance, you might alternate paragraphs that compare and contrast each text or devote the first half of the essay to one piece and the second half to another, making relevant comparisons along the way. The nature of the texts and your argument will suggest which of these is more effective in a specific instance.
- **Logical:** In some instances, it may be necessary to organize your essay in a particular order because of the logical structure of your central argument. For example, you may first have to establish that a particular pattern exists within a poem before showing that other elements of the poem contradict that pattern in an interesting way.

No matter what structure works best for your essay, try to avoid the five-paragraph essay structure you may have learned in high school. College-level essays usually call for more complex organizational strategies.

Writing Effective Transitions
Whether you're moving from a close reading of one stanza to another, or shifting from contextual background into a main argument, smooth transitions cue your reader that you're entering a new stage of analysis. Consider using transition phrases that reference the point you just made and show how it leads into the next:

- **Signposting:** “Having examined the narrator’s shifting tone, I will now turn to the imagery that reinforces this theme.”
- **Logical Connectors:** When used meaningfully, words like “however,” “furthermore,” and “by contrast” guide your reader through changes in perspective, building cohesion throughout the paper. But be cautious: unless used carefully, these same words can call attention to awkward transitions and read as excessively wordy.
- **Echoing Key Terms:** Revisit pivotal terms from the end of one paragraph in the topic sentence of the next. This repetition can act as a bridge, showing your reader how the parts of your argument reinforce each other. Do not vary your own key terms of analysis in the essay. A biologist wouldn’t include different names for a bacteria type to liven up the text, and writers in literature present, define, and stick with key terms throughout their text to promote clarity.

Balancing Sections and Avoiding Repetition
When developing an argument that spans multiple points, it’s easy to inadvertently restate the same idea. To prevent this, consider each paragraph or section’s main function: What new insight does it bring to the argument? Do your best to avoid redundancy by making sure each paragraph or subsection introduces at least one distinct idea or piece of evidence—that it has one distinctive “job” to do in relation to the rest of the paper. You can still reference earlier points or textual examples, but do so to deepen or refine your central argument, rather than simply repeating what you’ve already said. If each section contributes something fresh, your essay is more likely to be focused, coherent, and persuasive.

For examples of essays with effective organizations, see the list of prizewinning essays by Caltech students at the end of this guide.

RESEARCH AND WORKING WITH CRITICAL SOURCES

Many of the papers you will write in Caltech literature courses will ask you to focus only on primary literary texts, but some instructors may allow or require you to engage with historical sources or secondary sources by professional scholars. When looking for secondary sources, focus on scholarly articles, books published by university presses, or peer-reviewed journals that align directly with your topic. Academic databases—such as the MLA Bibliography, JSTOR, or Caltech’s LibSearch—are excellent starting points.

Before you commit to reading a source in full, scan its abstract or introduction to determine whether the author’s approach or subject matter will help you engage critically with the literary work you’re studying. Credible secondary materials provide evidence-based analysis; they don’t merely summarize or offer superficial commentary.

Strategies for Engaging with Scholarly Articles
Successful research involves more than collecting quotes. As you read literary criticism, ask yourself:

- What is the critic's main argument, and how does it align (or conflict) with my own developing perspective?
- Which parts of the critic's evidence or methodology resonate with my reading of the text, and which raise doubts?
- How does this source situate the text within its historical or theoretical framework?

Approaching secondary materials with a questioning mindset enables you to form connections between the text, the criticism, and your own analysis.

Integrating Secondary Sources into Your Argument
When used effectively, scholarly articles or books can provide historical background, illuminate theoretical angles, or offer compelling interpretations that enrich your own. Writing studies scholar Joseph Harris identifies three ways that writers can respond to another writer's ideas:

- **Coming to Terms:** Summarize the critic's main points accurately and succinctly, highlighting the features that are most relevant to your own argument.
- **Forwarding:** Borrow a useful observation, concept, or argument to deepen your reading of the primary text. Indicate how you're applying this borrowed idea to new ground.
- **Countering:** If you disagree with a critic's interpretation, articulate why. Use direct textual evidence or alternative scholarly perspectives to support your counterargument.

Always give due credit to the original author and place their arguments in conversation with yours. Secondary sources should never overshadow your own voice and ideas. Instead, they act as building blocks or counterpoints that help refine your central argument.

Maintaining Your Interpretive Voice
While research provides valuable perspectives, remember that *your own* close reading and argumentation are the heart of an English paper. Relying too heavily on a critic's viewpoint can leave your writing feeling derivative or secondhand. Even if you quote a respected authority, make sure to articulate your interpretation alongside or in response to theirs.

- **Critically Evaluate:** Resist the urge to accept any critical claim at face value. Ask whether it aligns with your reading of the primary text and whether your chosen evidence supports or challenges that claim.

- **Balance Your Paper:** Devote most of your paragraphs to analyzing passages from the primary text, using secondary sources as guides or points of debate, rather than as definitive statements on the work's meaning.
- **Sustain Your Own Argument:** Keep your central argument front and center. If a secondary source changes your perspective, integrate that shift into your argument and acknowledge it clearly, rather than letting the external commentary dominate your discussion.

In the example that follows, Caltech student Shwetha Kunnam forwards Collins's argument about the "mammy" stereotype to deepen her close reading of Derek Walcott. Notice how her paragraph never loses sight of her own argument, despite making use of a secondary source.

Example

Walcott's portrayal of Black women is very similar to Senghor's and echoes the dual stereotypes of "mammy" and "jezebel" that harm Black women to this day. The "mammy" stereotype portrays the Black woman as a "faithful, obedient domestic servant" (Collins 72). Even though such a woman "may be well loved and may wield considerable authority in her White "family," the mammy still knows her "place" as "obedient servant" (Collins 72-73). This trope is reflected in Walcott's portrayal of Eurycleia, who, beloved as she may be by her white employers, is unable to exert influence outside matters of the household. Her wisdom is confined to the spiritual and maternal spaces, shown through the addition of scenes not presented in the original Odyssey such as her retelling of "Nancy stories" (Walcott 8) about the gods to Odysseus and Telemachus that later prove to be true, offering Penelope support to cope with the loss of her husband (Walcott 21-22), and, along with Penelope, preventing Odysseus and Telemachus from hanging the disobedient servant Melantho (Walcott 155).

From McClure Prize winner Shwetha Kunnam's "The Influence of Négritude and Black Postcolonial Thought on Derek Walcott's The Odyssey: A Play"

CITATION PRACTICES IN ENGLISH PAPERS

Literary scholars use a variety of citation systems, such as MLA or Chicago, depending on where they are publishing their work. It is important to determine whether your course sets specific standards for citation style. Consult the Purdue OWL's Research and Citation Resources for information on specific citation styles.

No matter what citation style you are asked to use, it is important to provide a reference whenever you present another author's ideas. Both of these situations are shown in the example below, which uses MLA Style to cite lines from a Shakespeare play. Failing to cite sources properly could constitute plagiarism.

Example (MLA Style)

Before she arrives onstage, Othello informs the assembly that Desdemona showed unabashed interest in him and listened to his stories "with a greedy ear" (1.3.148). She coolly contradicts Brabantio's claim of her modesty, that she is "of spirit so still and quiet that her motion blushed at herself" (1.3.95-6).

From Hallett Smith Prize winner Suchita Nety's Objects of Interpretation in Othello

WRITING THE CONCLUSION

If you are writing a short paper and have done an adequate job organizing your paper, it is not necessary to write a conclusion that focuses on restating your central argument and evidence; the reader should already be familiar with your key ideas by the end of your essay. If they are not, solve this by revising your introduction and topic sentences. If the first time a reader understands your paper is when reading the conclusion, it's too late. Thus, an effective conclusion should remind the reader of your main ideas without simply repeating the central argument and main points verbatim. Instead of recounting each point you've made, try to highlight the overall significance of what you've found. Briefly recall the central line of inquiry you pursued and reiterate why that line of inquiry matters, but be careful not to diminish the impact of your argument through needless repetition.

A strong conclusion helps your reader see how your argument and evidence fit into a wider context. Think of this final paragraph as "opening a door" rather than closing one. Ask yourself, "What larger questions, debates, or ideas does my analysis raise?" You might consider:

- Relevant historical, cultural, or theoretical contexts
- Larger philosophical or social questions raised by the text
- Future areas of study or investigation for readers who share your interests
- How your conclusions might modify or challenge common readings of the text

Some instructors might require that you address specific questions in your conclusion, such as suggesting how your argument applies to other parts of the author's work. As always, carefully read your assignment guidelines to see if these elements are expected.

No matter how you choose to shape your conclusion, keep it concise, forward-looking, and connected to the core argument you have developed in your essay. By situating your analysis in a broader conversation and indicating why it matters, you will underscore the value of your work.

Example

Throughout his *Odyssey*, Walcott takes inspiration from Black anti-colonial thinkers, as exemplified by the similarities of his work to that of Leopold Senghor, Frantz Fanon, and Ousmane Sembène. Following in the tradition of Caribbean literature, he embeds elements of West Indian culture, such as spiritual traditions, language, and humor, into his work and includes Caribbean characters, the most ubiquitous of whom is the narrator Billy Blue. However, one of the flaws of early postcolonial analysis is the lack of intersectionality. Ultimately, the male-centric nature of anti-colonial movements and literature during the late 90s prevents Walcott from unlocking the full potential of female Caribbean characters such as Eurycleia and Circe. Instead, Walcott reduces Eurycleia and Circe to the stereotypical "mammy" and "jezebel", respectively, removing some of the strengths imbued in them by Homer. Walcott's Odyssey demonstrates both the successes and failures of early Black anti-colonial analysis, which served Black men well but often pigeonholed women of color into misogynistic tropes.

From McClure Prize winner Shwetha Kunnam's "The Influence of Négritude and Black Postcolonial Thought on Derek Walcott's The Odyssey: A Play"

ADDITIONAL POINTS TO CONSIDER

Writing in the Literary Present Tense
Literary scholars typically follow the convention of using the present tense when analyzing or discussing literary works. In an essay about literature, you might write, "Macbeth visits the witches again" rather than "Macbeth visited the witches again." By writing in the literary present, you emphasize that the events of the text are vivid and alive, as if they're happening right now. However, when discussing historical context or the events of a writer's life, literary scholars almost always shift back to the past tense: "Macbeth was first performed in 1606."

Writing in the First Person
Although some high school writing instruction discourages first-person pronouns, English papers at the college level often allow or even encourage a careful use of "I." When you say, "I will argue that the recurring ocean imagery shows the speaker of the poem's internal conflict," you clarify that you're offering an interpretation rather than a factual claim. Nonetheless, it's best to use "I" sparingly and purposefully, so that your argument remains focused on the text itself rather than on your personal preferences or experiences.

KEY FEATURES OF CLEAR ACADEMIC WRITING

Literary scholarship often deals with abstract, complex subjects, so writing about literature should strive for clarity. Clear writing exhibits a high degree of **coherence**, **cohesion**, and **conciseness**.

An essay demonstrating **coherence** focuses on a specific topic and purpose rather than jumping around. To judge coherence, we can look at the paper as a whole and at the

paragraph level. Do all of the paragraphs contribute to the essay's main argument, and do they appear in a logical order?

In **cohesive** writing, sentences connect to one another so that the reader can easily follow the writer's ideas from sentence to sentence. You can ensure that your writing is cohesive by moving from old information to new information in individual sentences and judiciously using transition words and phrases between sentences like "therefore," "however," "furthermore," and "in contrast."

When writing is **concise**, it does not contain unnecessary words and phrases. Sentence structure tends toward simplicity (e.g., subjects proceeding verbs; avoiding linking many phrases and clauses together), with longer or complex sentences being used sparingly. Philosophers especially value simple, straightforward language. As you revise, focus on simplifying sentences and eliminating unnecessary words.

Note that these features only characterize the writing itself. An excellent essay about literature must demonstrate a deep understanding of the readings and present strong original ideas and arguments.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Prize-Winning English Essays by Caltech Writers

- Grace Davis, "Mountains of Self: Dream Revelations Transcending Frame Narratives" (2024)
- Shrishti Pankaj Kulkarni, "*Beowulf* and the Moral Dilemma Between Kingship and Heroism" (2024)
- Heidi Redmond, "The Woman Who Waits No More" (2024)
- Grace Liu, "The Reproduction of Homosocial Domesticity Aboard the Pequod in Melville's *Moby-Dick*" (2023)
- Shwetha S. Kunnam, "The Influence of Négritude and Black Postcolonial Thought on Derek Walcott's *The Odyssey: A Play*" (2023)
- Margaret Rachel Lee, "Controlling the Female Body: Obsession and Loss of Autonomy in *Lolita* and 'Berenice'" (2022)
- Andrew M. Chan, "Messy Definitions and Blurred Lines: Marriage, Autonomy, and Reconciliation in Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure*" (2021)
- Victoria Liu, "Ahab's Solipsism and the Illusion of Self-Reliance" (2021)
- Andrew M. Chan, "What Do We Talk About When We Talk About Love? True Love, Passionate Love, and Pining in the Short Fiction of Raymond Carver and Tobias Wolff" (2021)
- Nivedita Kanrar, "Archetypes of Femininity in Shakespeare's Tragedies" (2020)
- Victoria Liu, "On Lily Bart's Specializations and Survival in the Upper Class" (2020)
- Brendan J. Hollaway, "Impassioned Love and Marriage in Shakespeare's Comedies" (2019)
- Crystal Liang, "Recollected Sanity" (2019)

- Reeti Kiran Gulati, "The Role of Human Emotion and Character in Shakespeare's Othello vs. God and Heaven in Cinthio's 'A Moorish Captain'" (2018)
- Maitreyi A. Nair, "An Exploration of Letter-Writing in Jane Austen's Work" (2018)
- Suchita Patil Nety, "Objects of Interpretation in *Othello*" (2017)
- Gauri Ganesh Shastri, "The Women of *Othello*: Shakespeare's Reinterpretation of 'A Moorish Captain'" (2017)
- Zofii A. Kaczmarek, "*Gaudy Night* Essay" (2017)
- Suchita Patil Nety, "Feminine Intellectual Fertility in the Writing of Christine de Pizan" (2016)
- Chaitanya Lakshmidhar Malladi, "Shakespeare's Crafting of the Ideal King in *Henry V*" (2015)
- Suchita Patil Nety, "Time and Fate in Shakespeare's *Othello* and Cinthio's 'The Moor of Venice'" (2014)

Hixon Writing Center Resources

- Avoiding Plagiarism: Guidelines and Expectations for Writing in HSS
- Working with Source and Writing about Literature
- Writing and Procrastination
- Making the Time to Write (And Actually Writing)
- Generating a Draft without Getting Blocked
- Revising with Reverse Outlines

Recommended English Writing Guides

- The Harvard Writing Center's Brief Guide to Writing the English Paper
- The UNC Writing Center's Literature, Drama, and Poetry Explication Guides

WORKS CONSULTED

The authors of this handout consulted several resources during the writing process:

- Acheson, Katherine O. *Writing Essays about Literature: A Brief Guide for College Students*. Broadview, 2021.
- Guillory, John. *On Close Reading*. U of Chicago P, 2025.
- Kramnick, Jonathan. *Criticism & Truth: On Method in Literary Studies*. U of Chicago P, 2023.