

# Writing About Literature: Some Helpful Things to Know

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## What makes for a good literature paper?

When you write an extended literary essay, often one requiring research, you are essentially making an argument. You are arguing that your perspective — an interpretation, an evaluative judgment, or a critical evaluation — is a valid one. Like any argument paper you have ever written for a composition course, you must have a specific, detailed **thesis statement** that reveals your perspective, and, like any good argument, your perspective must be one which is debatable.

For example, you would not want to make an argument of this sort:

Shakespeare's *Hamlet* is a play about a young man who seeks revenge.

That doesn't say anything — it's basically just a summary and is hardly debatable. If, however, you argue this:

Hamlet experiences internal conflict because he is in love with his mother,

that is debatable, controversial even. The rest of a paper with this argument as its thesis will be an attempt to show, using specific examples from the text and evidence from scholars, (1) how Hamlet is in love with his mother, (2) why he's in love with her, and (3) what implications there are for reading the play in this manner.

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You also want to avoid a thesis statement like this:

Spirituality means different things to different people. King Lear, The Book of Romans, and *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* each view the spirit differently.

Again, that says nothing that's not already self-evident. Why bother writing a paper about that? You're not writing an essay to list works that have nothing in common other than a general topic like "spirituality." You want to find certain works or authors that, while they may have several differences, do have some specific, unifying point. That point is your thesis. A better thesis would be:

Lear, Romans, and *Zen* each view the soul as the center of human personality.

Then you prove it, using examples from the texts that show that the soul is the center of personality.

### What kinds of topics are good ones?

The best topics are ones that originate out of your own reading of a work of literature, but here are some common approaches to consider:

- ❖ A discussion of a work's characters: are they realistic, symbolic, historically-based?
- ❖ A comparison/contrast of the choices different authors or characters make in a work
- ❖ A reading of a work based on an outside philosophical perspective (*i.e.*, how would a Freudian read *Hamlet*?)
- ❖ A study of the sources or historical event that occasioned a particular work (*i.e.*, comparing G.B. Shaw's *Pygmalion* with the original Greek myth of Pygmalion)
- ❖ An analysis of a specific image occurring in several works (*i.e.*, the use of moon imagery in certain plays, poems, novels)
- ❖ A "deconstruction" of a particular work (*i.e.*, unfolding an underlying racist worldview in Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*)
- ❖ A reading from a political perspective (*i.e.*, how would a Marxist read William Blake's "London"?)
- ❖ A study of the social, political, or economic context in which a work was written — how does the context influence the work?

### How do I start research?

Once you have decided on an interesting topic and work (or works), the best place to start is probably the Internet. Here you can usually find basic biographical data on authors, brief summaries of works, possibly some rudimentary analyses, and even bibliographies of sources related to your topic.

The Internet, however, rarely offers serious direct scholarship; you will have to use sources found in the library, sources like journal articles and scholarly books, to get information that you can use to build your own scholarship — your literary paper. Consult the library's on-line catalog and the MLA Periodical Index. Avoid citing dictionary or encyclopedic sources in your final paper.

### How do I use the information I find?

The secondary sources you find are only to be used as an aid. Your thoughts should make up most of the essay. As you develop your thesis, you will bring in the ideas of the scholars to back up what you have already said. For example, say you are arguing that Huck Finn is a Christ figure; that's your basic thesis. You give evidence from the novel that allows this reading, and then, at the right place, you might say the following, a paraphrase:

According to Susan Thomas, Huck sacrifices himself because he wants to set Jim free (129).

If the scholar states an important idea in a memorable way, use a direct quote [*i.e.*, "Huck's altruism and feelings of compassion for Jim force him to surrender to the danger" (Thomas 129).] Either way, you will then link that idea to your thesis.

### What about the MLA format?

All research papers on literature use the MLA format, as it is the universal citation method for the field of literary studies. Whenever you use a primary or secondary source, whether you are quoting or paraphrasing, you will make parenthetical citations in the MLA format [*i.e.*, (Smith 67).] Your Works Cited list will be the last page of your essay. Consult the *MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers* for further instructions.

Note, however, the following minor things about the MLA format:

- ❖ Titles of books, plays, or works published singularly (not anthologized) must be italicized; don't underline anything. (*i.e.*, *Hamlet*, *Great Expectations*)
- ❖ Titles of poems, short stories, or works published in an anthology will have quotation marks around them. (*i.e.*, "Ode on a Nightingale," "The Cask of Amontillado")
- ❖ The first page of your essay is not paginated, but all subsequent pages are. Next to the page number in the upper right margin, you should have your last name. (*i.e.*, Jones 12)

### What else should I remember?

- ❖ Don't leave a quote or paraphrase by itself — you must introduce it, explain it, and show how it relates to your thesis.
- ❖ Block format all quotations of more than three lines.
- ❖ When you quote brief passages of poetry, line and stanza divisions are shown as a slash (*i.e.*, "Roses are red, / Violets are blue / You love me / And I like you").