

Writing about literature

Writing about literature often seems like a mystery to students. Many believe that all they need to do is summarise what they have read, but that is a fast ticket to a failing grade unless specifically told to write a summary. Most of the time, when writing about literature, you will need to make some point about the work that goes beyond a simple summary. You will also need to back up your point with evidence from the text (quotations). You should reveal your own thoughts and your analytical abilities.

When writing about literature, there are certain conventions it helps to be aware of:

1. Verb tense use

When discussing the events depicted in literature, use the present tense. The assumption is that the events are always occurring at the present moment for the reader. Literature is timeless.

In Nathaniel Hawthorne's "My Kinsman, Major Molineux," Robin *comes* to the city seeking career help from his powerful relative. What he *finds* instead *is* total confusion. Everyone *laughs* at him when he *asks* for his kinsman. Finally he *discovers* the truth: his kinsman *has fallen* from power and all Robin's dreams *have fallen* with him. Robin probably *feels* bitter that he *believed** his kinsman's offer of help two years earlier.

* Here the past tense is used because the *that*-clause refers to an earlier event and feeling, both of which occurred before the time referred to in the rest of the sentence.

2. Style

A text on literature should **not** contain:

- Contractions (~~He's, she doesn't~~, etc)
- Slang / colloquialisms / informal language (~~Willy's kinda weird.~~)
- Unnecessary words / phrases
- Sexist language

3. Writing in the first person

The use of first person is permissible and can be encouraged when used wisely. Try to refrain from qualifying your argument with too many *I think* or *I feel*s, and be certain to support your claims with evidence from the text and not only your feelings.

4. The author and the narrative instance

The narrator of the work, when left unidentified, is referred to as the narrator or the speaker of the work (narrative instance) and is not confused with the author.

Your style will develop and improve the more you write. But in my experience the stylistic weaknesses of student writers tend to fall into several general areas, all of which can be strengthened if attention is paid to them.

Verbs. The quickest way to improve your writing is by paying attention to verbs. English is a language rich in verbs, so the use of vague verbs or long verb phrases is unnecessary. Simply converting *takes a look at* to *examines*, *talks about in detail* to *analyzes*, *sneaks out of* to *escapes*, etc will make a difference in your prose. Weak action verbs (such as *do*, *get*, *have*, *go*, *make*, *say*, etc) can often be replaced by stronger ones (*has*, for example, can be replaced by words like *displays*, *exemplifies*, *demonstrates*, etc). Weak action verbs paired with an adverb can usually be treated similarly (*talk heatedly* becomes *argue*, *go slowly* becomes *shuffle* or *dawdle*, *beat badly* becomes *annihilate*, etc), as can those paired with a noun (*make an argument* becomes *argue*, *give an explanation* becomes *explain*, etc). And as much as possible, make sure your verbs are in the active voice: *He threw the ball* (active voice) rather than *The ball was thrown by him* (passive voice). As you can see, passive voice is wordier and less direct.

Sentence variety. Make sure there's some variety in the length and types of your sentences. Work at occasionally opening a sentence with something other than the subject. Student writers often tend to write strings of short, simple sentences. This makes the paper choppy and makes the ideas sound simpleminded. If choppy sentences are a problem, combine some of them into longer and more complex sentences.

Wordiness. Make your prose clear and direct – remove all unnecessary words. Say *because* rather than *due to the fact that*, *is* rather than *is seen to be*, *would be* instead of *would prove to be*, etc. Watch out for redundancies. One of the most common in student writing is *the reason is because* – *because* means *the reason*. When you're editing your paper, ask yourself if each sentence could be simplified.