

Writing a Literature Essay: A Non-Prescriptive Introduction

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1. The Basics

- Identify a general area of interest in relation to the topic. Write down all your thoughts about it and see if you can produce a thesis based on it.
- A thesis is a judgment or a position on the topic you've chosen. What do you want to convey to your reader? It should be something that is arguable, rather than something that is obvious or likely to gain universal consent.
- Organize all your notes in light of this argument. If you assemble them all and discover there is not enough proof for your argument, get rid of it. Start again.
- Write your first draft, putting your materials in the order that you think is the most rhetorically persuasive. Watch out for these things: contradictions in your argument; gaps or assumptions in your reasoning; points that aren't strictly relevant to your claims; claims not supported by evidence; unacknowledged assumptions about the text or about your readers

2. The General Structure

- Title: should reflect the thesis and catch the reader's attention
- Opening paragraph(s): orient the reader to your topic and argument. Don't summarize all your points; write about the subject, but **don't** write about your essay itself, or about the assignment. You needn't tell your reader what you will discuss. Just discuss it.
- Middle paragraphs: I have no particular feelings about the middle part of an essay. It is nice to include smooth transitions between paragraphs, and to draw attention to your major supporting evidence for your thesis (this often takes the form of what high school English teachers call "topic sentences" – these are sometimes nice, but not essential). Just be sure that everything makes logical sense and supports your larger claim.

- Ending paragraph(s): Here you can summarize your main points if you like, and it is certainly wise to restate your thesis (to say, effectively, “ha! See what I’ve just convinced you of!”). It is often also wise (but again, not strictly necessary) to talk a bit more generally about the larger implications or significance of your findings and your argument (this doesn’t mean, though, that significance is irrelevant until this point – generally, it is best to ask yourself “why” and “who cares?” at every stage of writing the essay).

3. Proofreading: Questions to Ask Yourself

- Does the paper have a clear focus?
- Do the arguments make sense?
- Is textual evidence cited to support the arguments?
- Do the paragraphs make the paper seem more organized? Or do they seem arbitrary?
- Are ideas and paragraphs sufficiently developed and clear?
- Are the ideas presented in a logical order? Do paragraphs follow one another clearly?
- Is my grammar okay? Am I making any of my usual mistakes or any that were pointed out in my last paper? Here are common errors: run-on sentences; misused semicolons; incorrect punctuation within citations (consult MLA guidelines!); unclear antecedent referents for pronouns (what I call “existential-it” and “existential-this” are particularly common).

4. In-Text Citation

- Acknowledge all sources.
- Underline or *italicize* titles of books and other long works (plays, long poems). Titles of short stories, articles, individual poems, book chapters, songs, and lectures, etc., should appear in quotation marks.
- Quotations within your essay from any source should be incorporated into the flow of your regular sentences.
- Use a colon before most quotations.
- Punctuation follows parentheses for the most part. Within block quotations, though, periods and commas are placed within the quotation (which is not set off with quotation marks).
- Indicate any omissions from the middle of the quotation with three ellipses (three periods with spaces between).
- Use single quotation marks ('reality') only for a quotation within a quotation.
- Prose quotations of less than four lines should be incorporated as part of the text and placed within quotation marks. Longer ones are block quotes, set off as a block from the text by indenting.
- Place parenthetical references at the end of the sentence containing the material quoted or paraphrased. Include only the necessary info: if you are discussing only

one text, your reader already knows the author's last name; if you are citing a secondary source, type the author's name, a space, and the page number of the citation, like this: (Baker 50). Note that parentheses go before the final period of the sentence.

5. Works Cited List

Works Cited appear on a separate page at the end of your essay. List all sources you quoted or paraphrased. Entries are placed in alphabetical order according to author's last name. Start each entry at the left margin, and indent any other lines in the entry five spaces. Here are some examples (many others are available online, via the MIT server site):

Works Cited

Bérubé, Michael. "Plot Summary: Motives and Narrative Mechanics in Underworld and White Noise." In *Approaches to Teaching DeLillo's White Noise*. Eds. Tim Engles and John N. Duvall. New York: Modern Language Association of America, 2006. 135-43.

DeLillo, Don. *White Noise*. New York: Penguin, 1999.

"White Noise." *Wikipedia: The Free Encyclopedia*. 4 Jan. 2008.
<[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/White_Noise_\(novel\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/White_Noise_(novel))>.

6. Grading Rubric

A-level work is insightful, thoughtful, inspiring, exciting, interesting, and provocative; it has a point to make and supports that point with ample evidence; it is clearly and cogently stated and reads easily; it documents its sources, giving credit to other thinkers where credit is due; it makes every effort to capture the reader and carry her along from point to point; it answers the infamous, ultimate question: so what?

This is a general grading rubric for undergraduate literature papers. I tend to weight content and thinking and language and voice rather more than I do mechanics and structure, but these features are all interconnected ultimately and they are all crucial in contributing to the impact of a whole piece.

	Okay/Average (C)	Good (B)	Wow/Excellent (A)
Content, thinking, grasp of ideas			
Organization, structure, guidance for readers			
Language, sentences, wording, voice			

Mechanics (spelling, punctuation), and citations			
Overall			

Sources: <http://www.library.utoronto.ca/utel/language/essay.htm>;
<http://www.utm.utoronto.ca/~dwhite/papers.htm>