

INSIDER TIPS FROM LITERATURE MAJORS

Content

Avoid plot summary/unnecessary background information

Make sure you know the **audience**. Generally, it is someone who has read the text—for example, a fellow student in the class—which means that the writer should not recount plot events.

The following sentences are examples of what **not to do**. Watch out for general plot claims like Example 1, especially in introductions. Part or all of Example 2 may not be necessary, depending on context.

Pride and Prejudice is about the Bennett family's attempts to marry off the five Bennett daughters. Jane is the fairest in the Bennett family and hopes to marry Bingley.

Analysis should drive the paper

Some plot references are necessary, but they don't make the point alone; they should **support** the analysis. One way to think about emphasizing analysis over description is to subordinate the plot reference in a complex sentence whose main clause contains the analysis. Examples 1 and 2 show the writer's use of evidence or a quotation *in the service of* the analysis, the main point of the sentence.

- However, the film retains some of Austen's more serious tones by emphasizing Marianne's subdued nature and by ending on a scene that demonstrates Willoughby's regret.
- Similarly, Anne may recognize Mrs. Musgrove's impropriety when the latter discusses Henrietta's wedding in "that inconvenient tone of voice" with Mrs. Croft (Persuasion 239).

Not every sentence can include plot and analysis in this manner; some sentences will consist of plot reference alone. This is okay, as long as such sentences are preceded or soon followed by analysis.

Good Rule: Consider it a *red flag* if you see three or more consecutive sentences of plot summary alone. "Setting a scene" is unnecessary in literature papers.

Organization

Organize by the logic of the argument, not by plot progression

In general, avoid organizing by plot chronology of prose or by lines/section progression of poems. Most arguments do not require the writer to be tied to the plot chronology; in fact, getting *beyond* it can help the writer focus better on analysis. (In some cases, organizing by plot chronology or sections of poems might be necessary to the argument; be aware of this choice.)

Aim for complexity of analysis/organization

Avoid an essay structured like a list of points that could appear in any order. Instead, you want an essay in which each step is logically essential in a certain place and in which all steps *build* toward a conclusion.

For example, in an essay on a poem, consider it a *red flag* if the essay is structured around examples of one or more poetic techniques in the poem (e.g., metaphor, simile.). It is important to consider form in this manner, but the writer must show how form **contributes** to the thematic concerns of the poem. It is not enough to point out a simile; the writer must connect that with a larger point about the poem.

In an essay on prose with this problem, think about how the examples might build on, qualify, contradict each other, etc., to arrive at complex argument. This helps the writer see how the overall point becomes distinct from individual points.

Evidence

Evidence in literature papers, generally analyses of texts, is weighted toward quotations rather than paraphrase. Quotations must illustrate and advance the analysis. However, don't use a quotation if you can paraphrase just as well. If discussing a plot point, generally you can simply refer to the event rather than quote. Quotations are especially important when commenting on *language* and *form*.

Set up quotations intelligently...

...especially in poetry. Don't introduce a quote with "Line 8 says." In poetry, say something about the form or the language in the lead-in to the quotation, or, in a play or narrative, lead in with the dramatic set-up.

- The speaker elaborates further on the simile, emphasizing the inevitable forward push of time: "Each changing place with that which goes before,/In sequent toil all forwards do contend" (3-4).
- Even the image of the "pebbled shore" (1), upon which the waves crash, conveys a rougher, more violent end than a smooth, sandy shore would.

Use block quotations cautiously

Make sure that all of the quotation is necessary and that the writer follows it with analysis that unpacks the language or significance of the passage. Block quotations should not be used to illustrate an event in a narrative to which the writer could refer much more quickly.

In the following example, notice how the writer introduces the quotation with a general claim about the passage and then follows it with specific points, even re-quoting short phrases from the passage. Most importantly, the block quotation is *not* used to prove that something happens in the novel but rather to **prove a point** about the effects of the *style* of the writing.

Due to Anne's emotional turmoil, the description of the events lacks logical narrative progression and a removed, near-omniscient description:

Her eye half met Captain Wentworth's; a bow, a curtsy passed; she heard his voice—he talked to Mary; said all that was right, said something to the Miss Musgroves, enough to mark an easy footing: the room seemed full—full of persons and voices—but a few minutes ended it. (Persuasion 94)

Though this passage seems to relate to what happens, it more so relates Anne's interpretation of the events she notices. Captain Wentworth does not just speak; he "says all that is right." He does not just talk to the Miss Musgroves; he "marks an easy footing" with them. Other details come almost as disconnected pieces—a bow, a curtsy—as though Anne, focused on Wentworth alone and overcome emotionally, can perceive only moment by moment.

Quoting secondary sources

If using literary criticism, identify the critics. Frame argument *around* the critics, argue with them, qualify them, add to them, etc., rather than simply use them for support of a point.

As Osteen says, the episode seems to "[reinvent] Bloom as a stereotypically compulsive manager, a Boylanesque manipulator" (Osteen 838). Not only is Bloom's language economic, as Osteen argues (824); his very justification for his interest in Stephen constitutes an exchange.

For more on evidence, see Professor Strout's handout, "Some Characteristics of Good Essays About Literature."

Tense

Use the **present tense** when referring to events in the literary work (“Lizzy dislikes Darcy when she overhears him snub her”) as well as the writer’s or others’ interpretation. Use **present perfect tense** when referring to elements earlier in the work from a perspective later in the work (“Because she has heard Wickham’s lies about Darcy, Elizabeth misjudges Darcy and contemptuously refuses his first proposal”). Use **past tense** when referring to the author in his/her historical context (“Austen completed Northanger Abbey first of her six novels, but it was not published until after her death.”) (See Writing Center handout on verb tense.)

Other Tips

1. Consider the narrative perspective (the “speaker” in the poem).
2. Do not conflate the author and the narrator/speaker.
3. In general, do not talk about the author’s intention. Instead, talk about what the language/text itself does.
4. Consider form in addition to plot, especially in essays on prose, where plot can become the main consideration. In essays on poetry, link form to content.
5. Avoid the word *impact*, as noun or as verb. The verb is too strong and unsuited for the situation.
6. Avoid the word *mean* (“This line *means* that...”). This is too absolute a claim. Use more subtle language that emphasizes the effect on the reader: “The line *suggests, implies,*” etc.

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