

Guide for Writing in English

About Writing in English

In literary studies, cogent writing begins with careful close reading and analysis. Effective literary analysis moves beyond summary to examine form, content, and meaningful contexts. At the center of this analysis is an argument affirming the validity of your interpretation, supported by textual evidence from primary and/or secondary sources. Your essay should include a thesis statement—the claim your essay is attempting to prove—that is specific and worthy of debate, with an argument that is appropriately scaled for the assignment.

As you develop your argument, keep the following guidelines in mind:

- **Review your assignment prompt carefully.** Your professor will provide helpful information about the goals of your assignment, and how you should approach your writing. If you have questions about these expectations, visit with your professor.
- **Begin with the text.** Gather examples from your primary text to use as evidence, and do the same with any secondary sources you've also been assigned. Sort these textual examples into the main ideas that comprise the body of your essay, and build your thesis accordingly. As you present your evidence, use quotation, summary, and paraphrase in appropriate form and quantity.
- **Explore significance.** As you build your analysis, consider why your interpretation matters. What does it suggest about the text, the author, or broader cultural and historical frameworks?
- **Be original.** In most situations, your professor will want to hear your ideas about the text. You should aspire to present more than a mere summary of what's already been established or discussed in your course.

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About this guide

This guide contains
the following sections:

- About Writing in English
- Common Assignments in English
- Evidence in Writing about Literature
- Conventions of Writing about Literature
- Citations & Formatting
- Common Errors to Avoid in English Papers

The Disciplinary Writing Guides are designed to provide an introduction to the conventions, or rules, of writing in different subjects. These guides have been designed by Southwestern professors to help you understand what will be expected of you in your classes.

Particularly in more advanced settings, writers may draw upon various movements within literary theory to guide the analysis. The interpretive methods most commonly used by literary critics are listed below.

- **New Criticism** examines texts as self-contained objects, emphasizing close reading.
- **Structuralism** approaches literature as part of a system of signs.
- **Deconstruction** explores multiple and contradictory meanings within texts.
- **Psychoanalysis** uses psychoanalytic concepts to interpret authors, texts, and readers.
- **Historicism** examines literature within cultural and historical contexts.
- **Reader Response** explores the reader's reaction to and participation in the text.
- **Gender Studies/Queer Studies** focus on the study of gender and/or sexuality in literature.
- **Marxism** examines class and ideology drawing upon the socioeconomic theories of Marx.
- **Postcolonial Studies/Globalism** examines colonialism and its aftermath, and explores international perspectives.
- **Race and Ethnicity Studies** analyzes literary texts in relation to racial/ethnic identity.

Common Assignments in English

Most written assignments in literature courses will involve making an argument and persuading your reader of this claim with evidence in the form of textual examples. The assignments below rely upon these elements, and they are commonly assigned in literature courses at Southwestern. In some situations, you may be asked to use historical or cultural contexts to help you arrive at your interpretation. In more advanced courses, you may also use literary theory to direct your analysis. You may encounter these assignments individually or in some combination.

Close Readings

Close reading is the most basic writing task in literary analysis. It may be given as a standalone assignment, or it may be used as a building block in more complex essays. Close reading is the practice of analyzing passages of text, word by word, in order to draw implications; in doing so, it pays attention to a text's formal elements (allusions, images, patterns of rhythm, etc.). Many close readings begin with a focused analysis of a passage or short selection, building toward an argument that explains the selection's significance.

Comparisons of Texts

The compare and contrast essay looks for connections between texts, exploring similarities, differences, transformations, and other relationships. The purpose of the assignment is to discuss the significance of these relationships. Your paper should have a thesis stating the importance of the comparison, and you should support your argument with convincing evidence from both sources in the form of close reading.

Critiques

Writing a critique includes substantial evaluation of a secondary source, frequently asking you to consider both the author's purpose and your position on the source. Your task is to evaluate the author's claims and methods in a manner that reveals your own argument about the material.

Research Assignments

In literary studies, we use research to explore ideas and make arguments in relation to what has

already been published. In our field, you may encounter annotated bibliographies, literary research papers, and other related assignments. These tasks combine primary and secondary research, and both forms of research are essential to our work as literary scholars. Our campus librarians are a great resource; they can help direct you to a wide variety of multimedia tools appropriate for literary scholarship. To make an appointment with them, please consult the Smith Library Center website and fill out a "[Research Appointment Request](#)" form.

Evidence in Writing about Literature

In literary studies, we use extensive forms of textual evidence to support our arguments. The claims you make should be supported by one or more forms of evidence, largely in the form of quotation. Our evidence falls into two categories:

- **Primary sources:** a primary source is one encountered through firsthand study. In our field, many of our primary sources tend to be literary texts, but this category may also include films, performances, other creative works, interviews, historical documents, and surveys.
- **Secondary sources:** a secondary source is one produced by another researcher. In literary studies, secondary sources commonly include articles and books about literary works, author biographies, historical events, and sociopolitical and cultural contexts. Most of our secondary sources tend to be scholarly in nature; this means that they are written by academic and professional experts, and that they draw upon specialized information.

Remember that not all sources are equal in significance or relevance to your purpose. Smith Library Center suggests that you **use the following criteria to evaluate your sources:**

- **Currency:** the timeliness of the information
- **Relevance:** the importance of the information for your needs
- **Authority:** the source of the information
- **Accuracy:** the reliability, truthfulness, and correctness of the content
- **Purpose:** the reason the information exists

As you plan what evidence to use in your essay, think critically about what to include in order to best support your essay's purpose and argument. When appropriate, you also may consider addressing counterarguments and counterevidence to bolster your claims.

How do literary critics present their evidence?

Evidence in the literature paper is often presented in the form of quotation. Depending upon the details of your assignment prompt, your essay may include quotations from both primary and secondary sources. Although literary critics also may include summary and paraphrase, quotation is central to our practice of careful close analysis. You should use a quotation in situations when you want to draw attention to particular words and phrases in your original source that support your observations and analysis. **When you quote, you must accurately reproduce the original source.** If you need to change some aspect of the quotation (e.g. spelling, capitalization, punctuation, tense) to make sense in your paper, use brackets to demarcate the alteration.

Evidence is most effective when presented in suitable form and quantity. This table may help you decide when it makes the most sense to summarize, paraphrase, or quote:

	<i>What is it?</i>	<i>When should I use it?</i>
Summary	A brief restatement of the main ideas of a full text or lengthy passage	When you want provide a condensed overview of a text's main points
Paraphrase	A restatement (nearly equal in length to the original) of a shorter passage	When you want to clarify the wording of a sentence or idea
Quotation	A direct reprinting of another author's language	When you find wording particularly memorable or important to your argument

How should I format my quotations?

The Modern Language Association (MLA) suggests introducing your quotations with a signal phrase (a phrase that identifies your source). As an alternative, quotations also may be embedded within your sentence by using fragments of the original wording. Here are examples of both methods:

Signal phrase method: Zadie Smith writes, “Every moment happens twice: inside and outside, and they are two different histories” (299).

Embedding method: In *White Teeth*, postmodern doubling and simultaneity appear as “inside and outside” forms of history (Smith 299).

If your quotation is longer than four lines in length, you should create a **block quotation** by beginning a new line and typing your quotation without quotation marks. Block quotations should be indented one additional inch from the left margin, and they are typically introduced by a sentence with a colon.

How should I analyze my evidence?

Regardless of the quotation method you choose, you should follow the quotation with substantial discussion of the excerpt's significance in the context of your own arguments. This analysis of the quotation is an important way of conveying to your reader what is important about the evidence you've presented.

How should I cite information I use or quote?

It is important to document this information to provide additional credibility for your claims and to provide enough information for a reader interested in reviewing your sources in their original form. In most situations, all paraphrased and quoted material will be cited using MLA format, which is the major style and citation guide in our field. You can find more information on citation styles, including models and guidelines, in the [“Student Resources”](#) section of the Debby Ellis Writing Center website. For more information on citation, please see the below section, “Style Guidelines for Formatting and Citation.”

How can I avoid plagiarism?

Careful quotation and citation practices demonstrate that you’re not only aware of existing scholarship and literature, but that you are giving credit for others’ intellectual property. When in doubt, include citations for all information found through consultation with another source.

Conventions of Writing About Literature

The conventions for style and usage may vary depending upon the assignment type and audience, so it is important to check with your professor about specific instructions. As a general rule, our discipline tends to subscribe to the following guidelines:

- **Verb tense:** use present tense to discuss literature.
- **Active verbs:** when possible, avoid passive voice.
- **Pronouns:** third-person is appropriate for most situations; there may be times when first-person pronouns (i.e. “I” or “we”) might be acceptable in limited quantity to emphasize a particular claim.
- **Capitalization, spelling, and punctuation:** use formal conventions for standard written English.
- **Tone and diction:** these elements are driven by context and audience. Consult with your instructor if you have any questions.

Citations and Formatting

In most situations, you will use MLA guidelines to format your essay and cite your sources. The examples below address how to cite the simplest forms of single-authored print sources. MLA has a number of guidelines for citing other kinds of sources (with a range of variables) in print, digital, and multimedia form. For more case-specific guidelines, please consult the most recent edition of the *MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers*. You can also find guidelines and models for MLA citation on the [“Student Resources”](#) section of the Debby Ellis Writing Center website.

In-text Citations

The most basic form of in-text citation within the body of your essay involves providing the last name of the author and the relevant page number on which the quotation appears. This information should appear in parentheses after the quotation. In MLA citation, the **name of the author and the page number are not separated by a comma. A period should be placed after the parenthetical reference** to signal that this information is part of the sentence containing the quotation.

Example In-text Citation: In *White Teeth*, the narrator claims, “Every moment happens twice: inside and outside, and they are two different histories” (Smith 299).

Each of your quotations should have a parenthetical reference. Your reader should be able to use the information cited in the body of the text to find fuller documentation of your source in your list of works cited at the end of your paper.

Works Cited

After you’ve cited your sources within the body of your essay, you should also include a separate page listing all of the works cited in your paper. This list should be titled “Works Cited,” and the sources on it should appear in alphabetical order, with each entry formatted using hanging indentation. Each entry will consist of several elements, and periods are used to separate each major component:

- Author’s name, listed by last name, a comma, and the author’s first name
- Title of the work in italics or quotation marks, as appropriate
- Series, volume, or issue numbers for periodical sources
- Publication information (depending upon source, this may include the city of publication, the publisher’s name, or the date of publication)

- Relevant page numbers
- Medium of the source (e.g. “Print” or “Web”)

A basic entry for citing a book with one author might look like this (pay particular attention to formatting and punctuation):

Smith, Zadie. *White Teeth*. New York: Vintage International, 2000. Print.

A basic entry for citing a journal article with one author might look like this (again, pay particular attention to formatting and punctuation):

Watts, Jarica Linn. "We Are Divided People, Aren't We?: The Politics Of Multicultural Language And Dialect Crossing In Zadie Smith's *White Teeth*." *Textual Practice* 27.5 (2013): 851-874. Print.

Formatting

MLA style also includes instructions about the visual formatting of your essay. These guidelines address the following components:

- **Margins:** set at one-inch for top, bottom, and both sides of the essay; indent the first line of each paragraph one-half inch from the left margin.
- **Text format:** use a standard font (such as Times New Roman) in 12 point size.
- **Line spacing:** double-space the entire document and justify to the left margin.
- **Page numbers:** number each page with your last name and page number in the upper right corner.
- **Heading:** on the top left corner of the first page, type your name, your instructor’s name, the course, and the date on separate lines.
- **Title:** create an informative title for your essay and center it on the first page after your heading.

A Few Common Errors to Avoid

- **Lack of an argumentative thesis:** The literary thesis should present a convincing argument about the significance of your observations, avoiding statement of the obvious. Someone should be able to present reasonable forms of disagreement with your argument. The Debby Ellis Writing Center website offers some [tips for developing a strong thesis](#).
- **Too much plot summary:** You should imagine that your reader has some working familiarity with your subject text. Avoid overly lengthy descriptions by briefly introducing key scenes. Be selective and focus on analyzing just the details that are most central to your argument.
- **Inappropriate use of quotation:** Find the right balance of quoted information. In one extreme, a literary essay with too few quotations is likely lacking concrete evidence. At the other end of the spectrum, an essay with too many quotations may suffer from a lack of focus. In keeping with this point, use block quotations sparingly. The Debby Ellis Writing Center website also offers [tips for incorporating quotations](#).
- **Confusing the author and the speaker:** Remember that the author and the speaker/narrator are not the same person, nor do they share the same voice. Where appropriate, distinguish between these different layers of narrative and representation.
- **Over-reliance upon biography:** watch for **biographical fallacy**—assuming that a text provides a direct reflection of the author’s life. Biography is merely one aspect of the many historical and cultural contexts you may use to construct an argument.
- **Assumptions about authorial intent:** you should also watch for **intentional fallacy**—assuming that an author’s intent directly informs how we interpret a text. **Instead of asking what the author intends, we should instead study what the text does.**

A few additional resources you might consult:

- Abrams, M.H. and Geoffrey Harpham, *A Glossary of Literary Terms*. 9th ed. Boston: Wadsworth Publishing, 2008. Print.
- Gibaldi, Joseph. *MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers*. New York: Modern Language Association of America, 2009. Print.
- Graff, Gerald and Cathy Birkenstein. *They Say/I Say: The Moves that Matter in Academic Writing*. 2nd ed. New York: W.W. Norton, 2010. Print.
- Lunsford, Andrea. *The Everyday Writer*. 5th ed. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin’s, 2013. Print.
- The Purdue OWL*. Purdue U Writing Lab, 2010. Web.
- Strunk, William, and E B. White. *The Elements of Style*. New York: Macmillan, 1979. Print.