

A UNIVERSITY WRITING CENTER MINI-COURSE

Literature Papers

The Beginning...

Assuming that a work (or works, as the case may be) has already been chosen, a literature paper usually begins by introducing the work/works to be discussed. A good place to start is generally title of work and author. Some background information and the significance of the work will follow. What makes this particular work important? Is it historically significant in some way? Was it revolutionary in style or subject matter? Give the reader a reason to care about the short story, poem, novel, etc.

Kate Chopin's classic novel *The Awakening* represents the perfect example of an author who was truly ahead of her time. With its themes of infidelity and parental neglect written largely in homoerotic overtones, *The Awakening* was, for decades, misunderstood and the recipient of much caustic criticism. It was not until the 1950s and 60s that *The Awakening* garnered any significant amount of its much-deserved critical acclaim, when it was thrust back into the spotlight via the growing feminist movement.

Your next step in the introduction will be the thesis. Thesis can be a scary word. You can call it your assertion of brilliance or your epiphany or something else if that makes the ordeal seem less repulsive. The assertion is essentially the central theme or main idea of your paper. Your assertion should state something about the work(s) that you find interesting or unusual, something deeper than "John Lydon's *Rotten* is a good book because it is well written, funny, and stuff." It should be something that you think is probably not obvious to most people, even if it might seem obvious to you.

With the Wife of Bath, the central female character in *The Canterbury Tales*, Chaucer has created a character that will serve as the vehicle for his deviant psychosexual fantasy, while at the same time brilliantly disguising her to his readers as merely the portrait of the morally reprehensible female. He has done this through the narrator's description of her physical appearance, her descriptions of herself, her "airheadedness," her insatiable need to quench men's sexual thirsts, and her sadomasochistic relationship with her fifth, and favorite, husband.

Generally, the paper will seem much less like a daunting task the more interesting and unique your assertion of brilliance **seems to you**. **However, try not to become so abstract that you have a hard time supporting your assertion.**

Organization

You will want to make sure that you discuss your points in the order that they appear in your assertion. It can be confusing to the reader if you list "the narrator's description" first, but you begin the body by talking about "her sadomasochistic relationship with her fifth... husband."

A good way to play around with the organization is to form some sort of an outline. Take a sheet of paper for each of the points you're trying to make. With the example above,

you would need five sheets of paper. Write one of the points at the top of each sheet. On the paper you can list and order your arguments, exact places in the text that support those arguments, and any related outside resources you might have to strengthen your case. This strategy will serve many purposes. First, it will make it easier to find the order in which you wish to make your points. You can shuffle the papers around and find out which points are closely related and where your easiest transitions will be.

Planning can make writing the body move along much faster. You can avoid losing your train of thought by searching page after page for that one perfect quotation, because you will already have the page and line numbers (for poetry) written down on your paper. Planning can also aid you in avoiding digressions.

With an outline, you can save yourself the trouble of writing an entire paper only to find out that you didn't stay within the assignment's guidelines (it happens). The trouble with straying too far from the guidelines is that your paper may give the reader the impression that you weren't capable of completing the assignment, so you made up one of your own. If you are unsure of whether or not you are staying within the guidelines, or there simply are none, it might help to take your outline or ideas to the professor or even to the WRITING CENTER (blatant plug) and seek some input there.

The Narrator v. The Author

This is a very common mistake. The narrator is not necessarily the author, even if the text is written in the first person. An autobiography is the only instance where you should assume that they are the same person. Although it is true that the narrator, as well as other characters, may be based on the author, the author should be treated as entirely separate from the narrator and all other persons appearing in the work. When the narrator has a name, which is usually the case when a text is written in the first person, refer to him/her by name. If the narrator does not have a name, you can simply refer to "the narrator."

The Reader v. Your Professor

This is another common mistake, because, technically, the reader is your professor. You should try to eliminate this association, because it will not benefit your paper (or the grade you get on that paper) at all. When writing a literature paper, you should assume that your audience is not overly familiar with the work(s) you are discussing. You could pretend that you are writing for a publication... the *Screaming Tree*. Imagine that the readers of the *Screaming Tree* are literate people who have heard of the work you are discussing but have not necessarily read it, or have read it but do not remember it well. You should, therefore, give as much background information as necessary, so the readers can follow your points and arguments. Don't recite the story in its entirety, however, because you will bore those who are familiar with it. Give just enough information to make your points.

Quotations

Writing a literature paper is the complete opposite of writing a research paper in one large aspect... usage of quotations. There are probably other aspects that make the two opposite, but we're not talking about them right now.

In a research paper, quoting is generally discouraged and paraphrasing is preferred.

In a literature paper, paraphrasing is generally discouraged and quoting is preferred.

Quotations strengthen your arguments and work as hardcore evidence. To use the Wife of Bath example, saying, "Somewhere on page 160, the Wife of Bath says that she really likes having sex and lots of it" does not offer the reader concrete evidence. In order to obtain the hardcore evidence, the reader will have to get a copy of (in this case) *The Canterbury Tales* and find the text you're referring to. This lack of evidence detracts from your paper and makes your argument seem weak. One will wonder if you chose not to include the exact statement in your paper because either you are lazy or that's not really what the text is saying. A much more efficient way to make that same statement is to set up your scenario or argument and then introduce your textual evidence.

A problem that men still suffer with today is that of "horniness." It seems that no matter how low his sex drive, a man will still want to "go at it" more than his female partner. The Wife of Bath, on the other hand, has an insatiable lust for sex:

Which shal be bothe my dettour and my thrall,
 And have his tribulacion withal
 Upon his flesh whil that I am his wif.
 I have the power during al my lif
 Upon his propre body, and nat he. (??-??)

You can also sprinkle small quotations throughout your text in order to set up a scene:

The potential homosexuality of Edna is first revealed in a wildly homoerotic scene occurring in chapter VII, or 7. When Edna and Madame Ratignolle go for a walk along the beach together alone, Edna has an initial erotic attraction to Madame Ratignolle as the personification of romance. The narrator states that Edna had always "had a sensuous susceptibility to beauty" (McMichael 694). After a period of time, the two sit together on a porch of some sort and commence to conversing. During this conversation Edna turns "her quick eyes upon Madame Ratignolle and lean[s] forward... to bring her face quite close to that of her companion" (696). In response, Madame Ratignolle grasps Edna's hand "firmly and warmly," and then begins stroking it while "murmuring in an undertone" (696). Edna "len[ds] herself readily to the Creole's gentle caress," and "put[s] her head down on Madame Ratignolle's shoulder" (696, 698). She reveals many of her deepest secrets to Madame Ratignolle and feels flushed and intoxicated by this unaccustomed sexual candor. Until this point, Edna had possessed a self-contained, almost masturbatory sexuality and thus it is Madame Ratignolle who initiates Edna into the world of female love and ritual.

By incorporating quotes from this scene, readers get a much more direct sense of the homoerotic qualities of *The Awakening* than they could possibly ever get through paraphrasing alone.

While quotes do strengthen your paper, try not to use quotes just to take up space. Quotes that are unrelated to your overall argument will stand out, seem awkward, and weaken your paper.

One of the most difficult things to do is to integrate the quote into your paper smoothly. Avoid just throwing a quote in without a transition. Be equally careful to avoid a clichéd introduction like, "On page 9, it says "...". The best way to find the perfect transition is by trial and error. Keep "changing it up" until you find something that sounds nice to you. If all else fails, (another blatant plug coming here) the WRITING CENTER is always here to help you. Well, not always, just during the hours of operation.

You might notice that when Edna turns "her quick eyes upon Madame Ratignolle and lean[s] forward... to bring her face quite close to that of her companion," the quote contains an ellipsis (a series of three periods). Whenever you chose to leave words out of a quote in order to keep the flow of your paper from being interrupted, place an ellipsis in place of the excluded words.

Using that same quote, you might also notice the "[s]" that follows the word "lean." If you're quoting a text and have a clash in verb tenses (example- you're writing in the present tense and the text is written in the past tense), you can touch up the verbs in order to retain continuity. However, you must always place the [s], [ed], [ing], etc, inside brackets, so that the reader knows that you have changed the quote.

Most importantly, always document anything you quote from the work.

The Ending

The ending, or conclusion as it is more commonly known, is perhaps the hardest part of any paper. You might reintroduce the point(s) that you set out to prove with your assertion, but this time include a few key arguments that you made during the body. **In this instance, you are better served with paraphrasing, as opposed to quoting.** The hardest thing to avoid in the conclusion is the impression of it being the introduction, copied and pasted onto the end of the paper. This is one of the reasons to include key arguments that you made in the body. Another reason to include these key arguments is to leave them fresh in the mind of your reader, which is particularly important for any points which might have been pushed to the back of your reader's brain as he or she traveled through your paper with you.

A conclusion to the example involving *The Awakening* might look like this:

Edna Pontellier's death was suicide. More than that, it was a preconceived suicide and not just a whimsical decision. The suicide was an act of rebellion and a means by which she emancipated herself from a life that she felt was asphyxiating her. Edna Pontellier's homoerotic

lusting for the same sex on a larger scale represents the bisexual potential that is inherent in all humans. And, in spite of the fact that Edna did leave behind a world that could never fully understand the lesbian within, she also left behind two motherless children, a budding artistic talent, and a newfound independence that very few females of the time were able to boast.

The Proofreading

Once you have reached what looks like a finished product, you can search for grammatical errors and problems with word choice or punctuation... in other words, you can fine-tune it. It is always a good idea to read your paper aloud to yourself. You are more likely to hear an error than see one. You might have someone else go through it as well, in case there is something you missed. Everyone misses things. This can be done by a friend, classmate, or, even better, (alas, we have reached the final plug) the WRITING CENTER.

The Single Most Important Piece of Advice You Will Ever Receive

When choosing a work to write a literature paper on, do not choose a work that you do not understand. If you find yourself saying or thinking, "I have no idea what this means," find another piece of literature or get help from your professor.

... composed by Barbara Hardie, Literature Papers, 2001, University Writing Center, Western Carolina University.