

I GETTING STARTED

1) **Narrow your topic.** Since the paper length for this course is relatively short (5-7 pp. exclusive of Endnote and Works Cited pages), you should choose a topic that you can develop completely within this length. Avoid excessive breadth. Very few of us can hope to do justice to a topic such as “Shakespeare’s Theory of Tragedy from *Titus* to *Coriolanus*” or “Milton’s Satan from Top to Toe” in such a small space.

2) **Don’t condescend to your audience.** Your audience knows as much about literature as you do. Therefore, it does not need to be given a plot summary, or to be told that a certain character is “good” or “interesting,” that a man named Alexander Pope wrote a poem called *The Rape of the Lock* in the eighteenth century, or that people have been in love from the beginning of time as an introduction to *Wuthering Heights*. Two of your tasks as critic: inform your interested reader of something that she did not previously know; contribute something new and interesting to our knowledge of the text via your peculiar (i.e., interesting, offbeat) viewpoint.

3) **Narrow your thesis; ensure that it is arguable.** An academic audience expects that a formal paper will make a point. What are you *claiming* in your paper? The statement (often, but not always, encapsulated in one sentence) that defines your argument is the *thesis*. Your paper will be more interesting if your audience can contest as well as agree with the thesis. Avoid the capriciousness of the opinion-thesis (“I believe that Sir Philip Sidney is a great poet”). A thesis should also not be of the mechanical and arbitrary three-part variety (“*Twelfth Night* is a, b, and c”).

II IN MEDIAS RES

1) **Build your paper from the inside out.** This can be difficult to accomplish when you’re not accustomed to doing it, but try following your own cognitive processes—isolate those specific parts and passages of the text that interested you in the first place and led you to write the essay—and that support your thesis. Copy them out, mark them in your book, try organizing them in some fashion. Build your paragraphs in this way. Ask yourself which quotations cling together, which deserve their own paragraphs.

2) **Make premises, and make them primary.** Develop the thesis through organized steps, or blocks of argument. Paragraphs should have clearly-worded topic sentences: these are called *premises*. They need to reticulate from the thesis in some way that is not mechanical yet absolutely clear and convincing. A premise generally provides a reason as to why your thesis is true. If this sentence occurs at the beginning of the paragraph, it will give this writing unit shape and form and direct the reader.

3) **Support your premises with quotations.** As each premise is designed to develop and support your thesis, and your thesis is based upon the text itself, nearly every paragraph in your paper (except your introduction and conclusion) should be centered around a quotation from this text that helps support your point. This will also help you avoid needless plot summary and book reportage.

a) *Analyze* your quotations. Find words, phrases, or general ideas in your citations that you can discuss and relate to your premises.

b) *Avoid* simply paraphrasing a character’s words into your own, unless the actual meaning of a passage is in question and at issue.

c) *Cite only* as much as you are prepared to discuss thoroughly, and no more. Keep those quotations **SHORT**.

d) If you refer to your passage as such in the body of your paper, it is a quotation, passage, &c, not a “quote.”

III CITATION STYLE

1) If you are quoting one line of poetry or one sentence of prose (or less), cite it **within** the body of your paragraph, **using quotation marks**: Satan laments his fallen condition: “Myself am Hell” (*PL* 4.75). [Punctuation follows the parenthesis.]

2) If you cite fewer than two lines of poetry, or parts of lines, honor the line divisions with slash marks: “the hardest hart of stone, / Would hardly find to aggravate her griefe” (*FQ* 3.8.1). **Note: one need not honor the line-divisions in prose or use slash-marks.**

3) If you are citing more than this, set the passage off in **block quotation**, double-spaced, from the rest of your paper. **No quotation marks** here:

Let's do't after the high Roman fashion,
And make death proud to take us. Come, away:
This case of that huge spirit now is cold:
Ah, women, women! come; we have no friend
But resolution, and the briefest end . Come, away. (*Ant.* 4.15.86-90)

[Punctuation comes before the parenthesis.]

4) **Be consistent in your citation style.** Use Arabic numerals in parentheses to denote a play or long poem in multiple books with standardized abbreviations. Examples: (*Han.* 3.1.2); (*PL* 5.75); (*FQ* 1.2.34). The same logic applies as with MLA Works Cited Style.

5) **Avoid needless and distracting eccentricity.** Do not use single quotation marks except to quote something within standard quotation marks, and rarely, at that. Book, journal, play, and long poem titles are *italicized* or underlined. Essay, song, or short poem titles use "double quotation marks." Do not mix these things up. Use parentheses sparingly, mostly for citations. (Too many parenthetical clauses in sentences will confuse your reader).

IV USING SECONDARY MATERIALS

1. **Whenever possible, secondary sources should be supplementary.** Essays should reflect your exploration of a text and your own interests in it; the scholarship should take a back seat. Articles and books can be found in the *MLA Bibliography* (2nd floor of library), in bibliographies for authors and epochs, and in our online catalogue.

2. **Sources should be scholarly, reputable, and current.** No encyclopedias, please, no Cliff's Notes, no Sparknotes, no Wikipedia (!#@\$%^!), and no sources before the middle of the twentieth century, unless it's an acknowledged heavyweight: Dr. Johnson, Coleridge, Eliot. The Internet is for fun, and a good place to get started, but it's not, as of yet, entirely scholarly: restrict yourself to printed sources, or print material that has been scanned in its original form.

3. **What the pros do.** Publishing scholars use secondary critical sources to show their readers that they have reviewed all of the relevant, current scholarship on a particular topic and that the idea that they are advancing is genuinely new, interesting, and deserving of the readership that publication would entail. They expect this audience to be shrewd, competitive, and a bit adversarial, suspicious of filler, B.S., and outdated information. Once the readership is convinced of a scholar's credibility in these areas, she or he is allowed to “enter the discussion,” so to speak, by way of publication. The most common methods of employing secondary critical sources seem to be these:

a) The “Endnote #1” method: an early endnote in the text lists and discusses the relevant essays, books, or book chapters on the subject. This benefits the reader by allowing her to see what has been published and to read these other works if she chooses.

b) The reactive “Paragraph #1” method: an essay might begin with a discussion of those relevant and related pieces, with an explanation of the way that you are contributing to the discussion in an original way. Your essay may even be written as an argument against a particular idea.

c) No matter which documentation style a scholar employs (Chicago, MLA Works Cited, MLA Endnote), she or he generally observes these conventions: quote current critical material sparingly because paraphrase or summary is just as effective; use endnotes or footnotes so that the reader who is not interested in this material is not forced to wade through it; never use secondary sources as mere filler, or as unquestioned authority—just because it is in print does not mean that it is inviolably true.

AVOIDING NEEDLESS REPETITION

Any sympathetic and sophisticated audience for your writing expects that you avoid needless repetition of diction, syntax, and content. Cleaning up this verbal acne is every writer's bane, even for people who are experienced stylists and compose every day.

Try not to use the same construction with every sentence in a paragraph, and, most mercifully for your implied reader, avoid using the same substantive, such as a character's name, over and over again:

bad: Hamlet loves Ophelia. Hamlet is angry at Claudius. Hamlet is angry at his mother. Hamlet is friends with Horatio.

See if you can use different verb forms and sentence order for the syntax. You can combine sentences and use relative pronouns and synonyms, as well:

better: Hamlet's emotional, even stormy relationships dominate the play. Deeply angry at his mother and stepfather, he loves Ophelia and grieves a beloved father. Horatio's constant friendship provides the only solace. II) If you can, focus your paragraphs on a single idea, use a topic sentence, and don't say the same thing over and over again in consecutive sentences.

awful: In Act 1, Scene 1 of *Hamlet*, Horatio thinks he knows how to talk to the Ghost. "Speak to me" (129, 132), he says over and over because he tries to convince the Ghost that he knows how to talk to it. But Marcellus and Barnardo tell Horatio that he doesn't know how to talk to the Ghost and make him stay. It would be good if the Ghost could stay because then Horatio would be able to talk with him, and then he could help Hamlet and they could both talk to the Ghost.

talk = 5x Ghost = 5x Horatio = 3x
paragraph has no order or logic. All three sentences say the same thing.

less awful: Horatio may not be as educated as he thinks he is, which the first scene of the play demonstrates. He says "Speak to me" (1.1.129, 132), or something like it, numerous times, to try and make the Ghost stay. Yet the sentinels Barnardo and Marcellus rightly point out that all these efforts are in vain. Eventually Hamlet's friend concedes that they are right. He hears an important statement later on by the hero himself: "There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, / Than are dreamt of in your philosophy" (1.5.166-67). It suggests that school and book learning may not be enough for men such as themselves to navigate the universe. We cannot control the supernatural.

ANALYTICAL WRITING

Even in a tiny paper, a writer must strive for coherence and interesting analysis, avoiding needless plot summary and gigantic quotations that fill space. Paragraphs should have clear topic sentences and focus on a single topic with ideas presented in a logical order, aided by germane literary quotations. **To repeat from above, always**

- a) *Analyze* your quotations. Find words, phrases, or general ideas in your citations that you can discuss and relate to your premises;
- b) avoid the simple paraphrase of a character's words into your own, unless the actual meaning of a passage is in question and at issue; and, most crucial, hardest to master,
- c) cite only as much as you are prepared to discuss thoroughly, and no more. Keep those quotations **SHORT**.

What kinds of things could one notice and include in a paragraph as evidence to analyze? This will always be specific to your thesis or main point, obviously, but there are some questions to ask oneself.

- a) **Why** have I chosen this quotation?
- b) How **little** of it can I get away with quoting?

c) What words or phrases **really** make my point?

d) What is odd or unusual about it to **me**? How can I convey this **peculiarity** to my reader? How can I make it **seem** important, interesting, something that will teach my reader, get him or her to look at the text in a new way? For example, here is the first quatrain of Shakespeare's Sonnet 3:

Look in thy glass and tell the face thou viewest
Now is that time that face should form another,
Whose fresh repair if now thou not renewest,
Thou dost beguile the world, unbless some mother. (1-4)

Who is being addressed? If it's a man, is this usual or unusual for the time? Is it usual for our time? Why is "thou" used? What does it mean for a "face" to "form another"? Why do "repair" and "renewest" start with the same letter, or does it matter? What kinds of connotations does "beguile" have? How can a mother be "unbless[ed]"? Why is this quatrain first in the sonnet? What, ultimately, is the speaker telling the addressee? Why is he "telling" rather than "asking"? All of these things, by the way, can be turned into sentences. If one thinks of this as fodder, one need not use all of it. Keep in mind: specificity is good, vagueness is bad. Keeping your audience's interest is difficult even with your best performance. **Try not to give the readership a reason to stop reading.**

WRITING SUMMARIES

The ability to write accurate summaries of secondary materials is of crucial importance to the scholarly life. These can range in size from one vivid and carefully written paragraph (a précis or abstract) to something a few pages long (detailed summary). Their true utility lies in their possible future use by the compiler. Basic information about the piece summarized may include: its argument or thesis; its general methodology, or rhetorical structure; its literary or political ideology; its range of secondary materials or place in the history of the study of the topic; any important phrases that are **truly** worth quoting, or that merit later use in one's own work. The three most important things to remember about such writing:

1) The job of the person writing the summary is to represent, **accurately**, the ideas and perspective of the author of the journal article, book, or essay in edited collection, and to keep this point of view throughout. We should **not** begin writing the equivalent of a very short research paper on the same subject, as if the author being summarized is a minor player in our new enterprise. We should also not judge the piece and make disparaging remarks about it because we do not understand it, since such comments usually rebound ironically against us.

2) Specific ideas not your own, those that you paraphrase and summarize **as well as** cite in quotation, need to be properly documented in MLA parenthetical style, with a Works Cited page. This should help you avoid sloppy documentation as well as any resulting plagiarism, the unconscious as well as the less innocent variety. The details of this process can be found in any freshman handbook.

3) It is almost always better to paraphrase and summarize the other person's ideas, and to quote only what is truly pithy, memorable, and inimitable, or crucial to the article's thesis. Again: paraphrased and summarized material also needs to be documented, not just quoted materials.

QUOTING POETRY

1. Use parentheses and Arabic numerals for line-numbers. If we are all talking about the same poem, there's no need for a credit tag: "I'm sure I never wished them ill" (7). [in this case, ("Nymph" 7) is unnecessary]. Please also note that quotation marks (if used) precede the parenthetical citation, and that punctuation follows parentheses. [not "blah blah blah (7)" or "blah blah blah." (7)]

2. Lead-ins and quotations need to make grammatical and stylistic sense together.

E.g., The Nymph's first concern is the "wanton troopers" (1).

There are many opportunities to do this the wrong way. E.g.

- a) The Nymph is speaking a soliloquy “Have shot my fawn” to the audience.
- b) The Nymph is interesting. “The love of false and cruel men” (7). This is what I’m talking about.

For more detail on this matter, see the next section, “Lead-ins and Quotations.”

3. Ellipses are redundant at the beginnings and ends of quotations, even though popular media and culture tends to violate this convention.

Avoid: The speaker’s love for the faun “. . . See how it weeps . . .” (95) is always clear in the poem.

4. Please check your quotations for accuracy. Don’t add words that aren’t there or leave words out. Special importance: honor the line divisions in poetry, either with slash marks within the body of your paragraph for a line and a half or two or in proper block quotation for more than this.

Right: The Nymph’s last concern is for the fawn’s color, which has symbolic value: “I would have thine image be / White as I can” (121-22).

Wrong: The Nymph’s last concern is for the fawn’s color “. . . be white as I can . . .”

5. Do not change the capitalization in your quotation to fit your lead-in using square brackets. Keep the capitalization the poet uses, and change your lead-in to fit it.

Absolutely NOT: Marvell’s speaker uses the past tense: “[had] it lived long” (91).

Try this instead: Marvell’s speaker uses the past tense: “Had it lived long” (91)

LEAD-INS AND QUOTATIONS

Lead-ins and quotations need to make grammatical and stylistic sense together. A careful writer ensures that she or he represents the sense of the quotation accurately.

For, my good liege, she is so idly king’d,
Her sceptre so fantastically borne,
By a vain, giddy, shallow, humorous youth,
That fear attends her not.

(*H5* 2.4.26-29)

1. The Dolphin tells his father “For, my good liege, she is so idly king’d” (2.4.26) that Henry is not a good king. [Carelessly dumping a quotation into the middle of your own sentence so that it makes no sense.]

TRY: The Dolphin tells his father that England “is so idly king’d” (2.4.26).

2. The Dolphin dislikes Henry and feels that he is a rival. “By a vain, giddy, shallow, humorous youth, that fear” (2.4.28-29). [Presenting a quotation without any connective tissue or punctuation, using only a fragment of it so that it makes no sense whatever, not completing the grammar within, failing to observe the conventions of quoting poetry within the body of your own text (honoring line divisions with slash marks, reproducing appropriate capitalization in poetry), and so on.]

TRY: Obviously, the Dolphin feels that Henry is beneath contempt since England’s “scepter” is “so fantastically borne, / By a vain, giddy, shallow, humorous youth, / That fear attends her not” (2.4.27-29).

3. Shakespeare shows the Dolphin to be a shallow, foolish person in his misappraisal of Henry: “Her sceptre so fantastically borne, by a vain, giddy, shallow, humorous youth” (2.4.27-28). [Again failing to observe the conventions of quoting poetry within the body of one’s own text, no logical connection between lead-in and quotation, fragment does not make grammatical sense in context of the lead-in.]

TRY: Shakespeare shows the Dolphin to be a shallow, foolish person when he mistakenly appraises Henry as “a vain, giddy, shallow, humorous youth” (2.4.28).

4. The Dolphin does not wish to be bothered “[b]y a vain, giddy, shallow, humorous youth” (2.4.28). [Using square brackets to change the capitalization needlessly.]

TRY: The Dolphin does not wish to be bothered “By a vain, giddy, shallow, humorous youth” (2.4.28).

OR: The Dolphin does not wish to be bothered with “a vain, giddy, shallow, humorous youth” (2.4.28).

Sixteen Criteria for Self-Examination

I Overview

- a) Have I followed the instructions that the assignment provides? If so, how? If not, why not?
- b) Does my essay simply summarize a literary text? rehash the plot, provide pointless paraphrase of poetry? Or does it provide real analysis, explain **why** something is the way it is rather than simply **what** it is?
- c) Are my paragraphs in a defensible order, or could I shuffle the deck and create the same effect?
- d) Who is my audience? Does it consist of people who know my material as well as I do? If so, am I addressing my reader as if she or he has never read anything more complicated than a cereal box?

II Paragraphs

- a) Have I given my reader an initial topic sentence or premise? Something that helps him or her follow my argument or series of observations?
- b) Does my paragraph focus on a single idea, or advance several small, related, yet ultimately different concepts?
- c) What evidence have I provided? How do I discuss this material? Or do I just drop it in my paragraph and go on, willy-nilly, to a new idea, leaving my reader to figure it out?
- d) How much of my paper is detail? Small, significant, usefully peculiar observation? How much is pointless generalization, stating the obvious?

III Repetition

- a) Do I begin each sentence with the same construction? Subject-verb-object, or even a dangling participle (“[Verb]ing x, unclear subject tries to find its verb”)? If I do this, why?
- b) Or, most tortuously for my reader, do I begin each sentence in a paragraph with the same substantive, such as the name of my title character?
- c) Is a given paragraph studded with the use of the same word five or fifteen times? If so, why? Do I know what relative pronouns or appositives are and why I can use them?
- d) Does every sentence say the same thing, or close to it? Can I combine some sentences and eliminate others?

IV Details

- a) Do my quotations and lead-ins make grammatical sense together? (Do I need to read that handout again, or even for the first time?) How does a multi-word sentence with a multi-word quotation sound when I read it aloud? Does it make sense even to me when I hear it in my own voice and intonation?
- b) For that matter, when I read my sentences aloud, do they seem sharp, clear, focused? Or do they sound clotted, unclear, confusing, so that I myself do not know what I am talking about?
- c) Have I focused on words and phrases and their significance as part of my analysis or not? (see I.b, II.c)
- d) How often do my sentences use clichés or hackneyed phrases? How often do I use vague words such as “very,” “many,” “lots,” “important”? Do I know what the passive voice is? If I do, and I use it, do I know why?