



Writing about Fiction

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Also see the OWL handout on Writing about Literature at http://owl.english.purdue.edu/handouts/general/gi_lit.html.

Writing about a story or novel can be difficult because fiction is generally very complex and usually includes several points or themes. To discover these interwoven meanings, you must read the work closely. Below are three techniques for reading fiction actively and critically. Close reading takes more time than quick, superficial reading, but doing a close reading will save you from a lot of frustration and anxiety when you begin to develop your thesis.

Close Reading a Text

Use these "tracking" methods to yield a richer understanding of the text and lay a solid ground work for your thesis.

1. Use a highlighter, but only after you've read for comprehension. The point of highlighting at this stage is to note key passages, phrases, turning points in the story.

Pitfalls:

Highlighting too much
Highlighting without notes in the margins

2. Write marginal notes in the text.

These should be questions, comments, dialogue with the text itself.

A paragraph from Doris Lessing's short story "A Woman on a Roof" serves as an example:

The second paragraph could have a note from the reader like this:

Marginal Notes	Text
<i>Why is the man annoyed by the sunbather? Is Lessing commenting on sexist attitudes?</i>	Then they saw her, between chimneys, about fifty yards away. She lay face down on a brown blanket. They could see the top part of her: black hair, aflushed solid back, arms spread out. "She's stark naked," said Stanley, sounding annoyed.

3. Keep a notebook for freewrite summaries and response entries.

Write quickly after your reading: ask questions, attempt answers and make comments about whatever catches your attention. A good question to begin with when writing response entries is "What point does the author seem to be making?"

4. Step back.

After close reading and annotating, can you now make a statement about the story's meaning? Is the author commenting on a certain type of person or situation? What is that comment?

Developing a Thesis

1. Once you've read the story or novel closely, look back over your notes for patterns of questions or ideas that interest you. Have most of your questions been about the characters, how they develop or change?

For example:

If you are reading Conrad's *The Secret Agent*, do you seem to be most interested in what the author has to say about society? Choose a pattern of ideas and express it in the form of a question and an answer such as the following:

Question: What does Conrad seem to be suggesting about early 20th century London society in his novel *The Secret Agent*?

Answer: Conrad suggests that all classes of society are corrupt.

Pitfalls:

Choosing too many ideas.
Choosing an idea without any support.

2. Once you have some general points to focus on, write your possible ideas and answer them.

For example:

Question: How does Conrad develop the idea that all classes of society are corrupt?

Answer: He uses images of beasts and cannibalism whether he's describing socialites, policemen or secret agents.

3. To write your thesis statement, all you have to do is turn the question and answer around. You've already given the answer, now just put it in a sentence (or a couple of sentences) so that the thesis of your paper is clear.

For example:

In his novel, The Secret Agent, Conrad uses beast and cannibal imagery to describe the characters and their relationships to each other. This pattern of images suggests that Conrad saw corruption in every level of early twentieth century London society.

4. Now that you're familiar with the story or novel and have developed a thesis statement, you're ready to choose the evidence you'll use to support your thesis. There are a lot of good ways to do this, but all of them depend on a strong thesis for their direction.

For example:

Here's a student's thesis about Joseph Conrad's The Secret Agent.

In his novel, The Secret Agent, Conrad uses beast and cannibal imagery to describe the characters and their relationships to each other. This pattern of images suggests that Conrad saw corruption in every level of early twentieth century London society.

This thesis focuses on the idea of social corruption and the device of imagery. To support this thesis, you would need to find images of beasts and cannibalism within the text.

Pre-Writing Activities

1. Freewrite

Without referring to the text or your notes, write for five to ten minutes on all the images (or the device you have chosen to examine) you can recall. This will provide an initial list which will make up your body of evidence.

2. Review

Look back through the text and your notes to further identify evidence, keeping focused on the particular device you want to discuss.

3. Research

Optional: Ask your instructor about outside sources before you use them.

Once you've identified enough textual evidence to support your thesis, you may want to see what other writers have had to say about your topic. This kind of appeal to other authorities helps you back up and interpret your reading of the work.

4. Evaluate

You will probably generate more evidence than you can use. One way to decide which evidence to take and which to leave is to limit your choices to the best, most illustrative examples you can find. Focus on how the devices are used to develop major characters, major scenes, and major turning points in the work.

Drafting Your Essay

You've read and annotated the work, developed a thesis, and identified your evidence. Now you're ready to work your evidence into your draft. Here are some effective techniques.

1. Quoting

● What is a quote?

Quoting involves taking a word, phrase, or passage directly from the story, novel, or critical essay and working it grammatically into your discussion. Here's an example:

In his novel, The Secret Agent, Conrad describes Verloc as "undemonstrative and burly in a fat-pig style...."(69) The pig image suggests that Verloc is not a lean, zealous anarchist, but is actually a corrupt, complacent middle class man who is interested in preserving his comfortable status.

Notice three things about the example above:

- The passage from the novel is enclosed in quotes and the page number is indicated in parentheses. For more help see our handouts on MLA and APA at <http://owl.english.purdue.edu/handouts/research/index.html>.
- The passage is introduced in a coherent grammatical style; it reads like a complete, correct sentence. For more help, see our handout on using quotation marks at http://owl.english.purdue.edu/handouts/grammar/q_quote.html.
- The quote is interpreted, not patched on and left for the reader to figure out what it means.

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