

# **A Short Guide to Writing an Academic Paper**

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## **Writing in the Discipline: What are the goals of writing about literature?**

Does literature have a function? In some ways, the question itself seems to undermine the very imaginative quality of the form, which records, informs, educates, probes, entertains, and elevates, to name only a few of its myriad and unique qualities that represent our very essence as humans. In their inexhaustible formulations, literary texts are the record of who we are; they define and describe us as people; they take our pulse as a society and culture; hold to us a mirror of ourselves; they take us on far flung journeys deep into our souls and far into worlds beyond our own experience and reach. The stories we tell ourselves about ourselves are among the most accomplished expressions of our natural gifts, the gifts of consciousness and imagination that distinguish us as a species. And while writing good literature may be the privilege of a talented few, reading it is not just a universal privilege, it is a basic human need, something we cannot do without.

Writing about literature is something different still. In many ways, it is another form of reading, an attempt to rewind the literary work, reverse the process of its formulation and figure out its makeup, the different parts that make the whole. You may rightly ask, why do that? Why take apart something that is so beautiful and neat; something that gives us so much pleasure simply as it is, in its complete form. The answer, again, has to do with who we are. We do that, because it is in our nature to take things apart, try to figure out the different parts that make up the wonder, and in the process, learn about ourselves. When George Mallory, a British mountaineer who tried to climb Mt. Everest, was asked why he wanted to do it, he allegedly retorted with these famous three words: “because it's there.” When Sir Edmond Hillary, who was the first man who actually made it to the top of the mountain, was asked a similar question, his answer was slightly more revealing: “It is not the mountain we conquer but ourselves.” We write about literature because it's there, and we do it in order to find things about ourselves.

In its most basic form, then, writing about literature is a process of self-discovery. Writing about the literature of a different group of people—Germans, Russians, Indians, or Jews, as is the case in this course—does not only reveal to us things about ourselves, but about other peoples and cultures as well and about the world we live in.

Caveat:

Since the “experience of literature” is not something one can really measure or teach, this guide is aimed at enriching the reading experience by providing more practical advice on various ways to decipher and understand literary texts. Hopefully, such analysis will enhance the reading experience and the process of self-discovery.

More practically still - learning how to write about literature imparts several skills that can be useful elsewhere. Literature consists of textual formulations that use language imaginatively to convey a multiplicity of meanings by using a variety of abstract concepts such as characterization, narrative voice, tone, mode, symbols etc. Papers that analyze such texts train students how to read critically, how to identify and categorize complex textual information, how to evaluate it, and, finally, how to argue

opinions clearly, methodically, and convincingly concerning these concepts.

But how is this done? How do we actually approach a literary work and take it apart or analyze it? There are various ways this can be done. Here, we shall review three of these ways: a review paper, a textual analysis, and a research paper. All three forms share common elements. The difference between them is in the focus of the paper.

## **Review Paper**

A review paper is usually a short paper of up to two pages that introduces a work of fiction by summarizing its plot and providing a brief evaluation of the work. Because it is short, a review paper does not usually need to bring textual proof for the evaluative claims it makes.

### **PURPOSE -**

The purpose of a review paper is to introduce readers to a specific work, familiarize them with it, and evaluate it. In order to do so, the writer of the review needs to read the work thoroughly, become familiar with its various details and be able to explain these details simply and clearly to readers, who do not know the work. Based on the summary of the work, the reviewer then provides a brief evaluation of it.

### **INTENDED AUDIENCE -**

Review papers are usually aimed at casual readers, interested people who either want to know more about a certain book before they decide to read it, or people who don't have the inclination or the time to read a certain work of fiction, but who are nevertheless interested to know about it in general. Such casual readers look for two main things, information and evaluation. They want to know what the work is about (plot, characters), and they want to know what the reviewer thinks about it (good, bad).

### **FORM / STRUCTURE -**

The structure of a review is very simple. It contains a short summary of the plot, the characters, and other relevant features that distinguish the literary piece, and a subjective evaluation of the work.

When summarizing a work of fiction try to be direct and write simply. Focus on the main plot or drama and on the main characters so that readers grasp what the work is about without being distracted by intricate information. Remember that a work of fiction is never read the same way by two different readers. At the same time, the very elements you choose to focus on and write about constitute an interpretation. You may choose to separate your summary from your evaluation or combine the two more organically. Let's look at an example from a familiar text, the fairy tale about Goldilocks and the Three Bears.

**Example 1** – Plot summary and evaluation are separate:

#### Plot summary:

“Goldilocks and the Three Bears” is a story about a little girl who, during a stroll in the forest, chances upon a small house. Finding no one at home, Goldilocks goes inside, wanders through various rooms and finally falls asleep in the family's bedroom. She is awakened from her sleep when the bears return

home and manages to escape before the surprised animals can react to her presence.

Evaluation:

This is an imaginative tale about a magical world, in which bears live in houses and little girls can converse with them. It is also a suspenseful story that has a happy ending. It takes us into the lion's den—the bears' house—and then, at the very last moment, lets the girl escape danger. It is a fanciful, suspenseful and entertaining story.

**Example 2** - Plot summary and evaluation are combined:

“Goldilocks and the Three Bears” is an imaginative tale about a magical world, in which bears live in houses and little girls can converse with them. The fanciful, suspenseful and entertaining tale is a story about a little girl who, during a stroll in the forest, chances upon a small house. Finding no one at home, Goldilocks goes inside, wanders through various rooms and finally falls asleep in the family's bedroom. She is awakened from her sleep when the bears return home and, in a surprise happy ending, manages to escape before the startled animals can react to her presence.

## **Textual Analysis Paper**

A textual analysis paper is longer than a review paper but shorter than a research paper. Such a paper focuses in greater detail on one or more elements of a work of fiction, usually notable elements that distinguish the work, hold a clue to its attraction as a work of art and help explain it. As its name suggests, a textual analysis focuses on the language of the text and its various components and usages to convey meaning. A textual analysis is, therefore, somewhat technical and involves careful reading and identification of specific textual elements, from characters' names, to parts of speech (use of verbs, pronouns, adjectives, etc.), to the use of metaphors and beyond. We focus on these small details because, ultimately, these are the elements that determine larger and more abstract concepts such as symbolism, tone of voice, narrative authority and ultimately the meaning of a work of fiction.

### **PURPOSE -**

The purpose of textual analysis is to go beyond a casual review. It is aimed not only at introducing readers to a specific work of fiction, but also at providing a thorough examination and evaluation of it and at suggesting a greater meaning concerning the work. In its purest form, a textual analysis is really an exercise in curiosity. Although it is bound by a specific structure, a textual analysis is not limited by the kinds of questions it asks, or the kinds of inquiry it suggests. Such a paper may explore any aspect of a work by taking it apart and probing its components in order to illuminate it. But a good analysis goes even further than that by suggesting the relevance of the work to the reader's own life and times. Since one of the most fundamental reasons that we read fiction is to teach us something about the world around us and about ourselves, a textual analysis tries to find out precisely what it is the work in question tells us about either or both.

### **INTENDED AUDIENCE -**

Textual analysis papers are aimed at a narrower audience, usually readers who are familiar with the literature analyzed and are interested in expanding their knowledge about it. Since such readers know about literature in general and may also know the work under discussion in particular, we can rely on

this knowledge and suggest ways to expand it. For this reason, textual analyses can also be more difficult. Writing for the cognoscenti, for those who are in the know, forces us to innovate, which is never simple. At the same time, meeting this challenge can also be very rewarding.

#### FORM / STRUCTURE -

Because a textual analysis paper is thematically open-ended, it helps to structure it clearly and define its different parts, which include:

1. Opening – introduction of the work under discussion and thesis of paper
2. Body of paper – argumentation
3. Conclusion – summary of arguments and closure

#### 1. Opening

In many ways, this is the most difficult part of the paper, because finding what to write about, formulating a thesis, is a difficult undertaking, especially for readers who are not trained in analytical writing and do not know a lot about the work they are asked to examine.

Formulating an argument or thesis: Start by asking a question about the work you've read. Questions such as, what stood out in the text? What was unusual about it? What aspects of it intrigued you, peaked your curiosity, encouraged you to keep on reading? It may be any aspect of the text, including characters (names, descriptions, relationships), plot (time, place, duration), use of language (lexicon, complexity, tone, mode), format of the work, structure, etc.

Let's take the story of Goldilocks again. Although this is an old, familiar fairy tale, let's try to ignore for a moment the conventions of the genre. What, then, stands out in the text, unusual about it, intriguing for us today? Certainly the mixture of fantasy and reality, a world in which animals and humans inhabit the same world as equals. Another intriguing aspect of the story is how a little girl like Goldilocks strolls through a forest on her own in the first place. Yet another peculiarity of the story is that Goldilocks not only hikes alone through a forest, but walks into a strangers' house cavalierly, without regard to either danger or etiquette. Finally, what about the bears? How did they feel about the squatter they found in their house and what were they going to do about it?

Based on these questions, let's try to formulate one of them into a thesis. Since we live in a somewhat litigious society today, let's focus on Goldilocks' disregard for property and privacy and her unlawful entry into the bears' house and ask the following question: Is “Goldilocks and the Three Bears” a cautionary tale about the value of private property?

In order to write the opening paragraph using this question, let us now summarize the story and then add to it the thesis question (notice the additions, underlined, that were made to the more neutral summary of the story from above):

“Goldilocks and the Three Bears” is a cautionary tale about an impudent little girl who, during a stroll in the forest, chances upon a small house. Finding no one at home, Goldilocks nevertheless goes into the house without asking permission, wanders brazenly through its various rooms, uses them as she pleases, and even has the audacity to fall

asleep in the family's bedroom, without any compunction. She is awoken from her sleep when the bears return home and manages to escape before the surprised residents can punish her for her trespassing. Is this story a simple educational tale about the value of private property? The amount of time spent in describing Goldilocks' use of utensils, furniture and rooms in the house suggests as much, and her narrow escape at the end serves as a warning to little children to refrain from taking such liberties, even if they happen to be exceptionally brave children.

Note: other readers may understand the story differently, of course, and emphasize the girl's independence, bravery, and resourcefulness in the face of danger, or focus on the sense of measure the story imparts in its protracted description of the girl's selection of chairs, eating utensils, and a bed.

## 2. Body of paper - argumentation

In addition to asking or stating your thesis, it is always a good idea to tell readers how you intend to prove it. This should preferably be done in the first or second paragraph of the paper. Telling readers how you propose to prove your thesis charts a kind of map of your paper and guides readers through it. Note, for instance, how after stating the question or thesis, above, the text goes on to make three more points or arguments in support of the thesis:

- a. That there is ample textual evidence in the story that deals with property.
- b. That the structure of the plot—great danger, narrow escape—is cautionary.
- c. That personal merit—Goldilocks' bravery—is not an excuse for trespassing.

Once you have written down these arguments, all you have to do is develop them one by one in the body of the paper in order to prove your thesis, as follows:

- a. List the various instances in the text that mention Goldilocks' abuse of the bears' property, her use of their furniture (chairs), their eating utensils (spoons, bowls), and finally their beds.
- b. Describe the structure of the story and its dramatic turning points: the girl's stroll in the forest, her discovery of the house, her curiosity about it and her break-in, her illicit use of it, and finally her discovery and narrow escape.
- c. Summarize the first previous points as examples of Goldilocks' nerve, initiative, and resourcefulness, but also as examples of her gross irresponsibility, and point out that these could have easily resulted in a very different and disastrous ending.

## 3. Conclusion -

At the end, summarize the main points you made in your arguments. Mention the inordinate space that the story dedicates to the use and abuse of private property, the distressing plot in which a little girl almost gets mauled by angry bears, and finally the matter of her exceptional personal qualities as a poor excuse for her behavior. Conclude by pointing out how all of the above qualify your assessment and prove it conclusively.

## **The Research Paper**

A research paper examines a work of fiction through the use of secondary sources. In the case of a

paper about literature, this means two kinds of sources:

- Articles that review or analyze the same or related works
- Articles that provide more objective data on various aspects of the literary work, like:
  - a. Biographical information about the author
  - b. Information about the time/people/institutions/society the work deals with
  - c. Theoretical discussions of literature

## PURPOSE

The purpose of a research paper is to provide a wider perspective on a work of fiction that uses the benefit of other readers' understanding, knowledge and expertise. Since you probably know relatively little about the work you read, the circumstances or time in which it was written, the audience it was intended for, etc., collecting information about various aspects of the work allows you to understand it better. Often, reading what others wrote about a specific story can make that story even more intriguing and can inspire questions about it that you would not have been able to ask on your own. Conversely, you may disagree with other readers' interpretation of a story and would want to counter their reading of it with your own. Writing a research paper, then, is akin to a good decision-making process. You read a story and form an initial opinion about it. You then read the opinions of others about it or collect more information about it. Finally, by considering your own interpretation against the interpretation of others, and by processing the information you gathered, you arrive at a deeper and more knowledgeable understanding of the story.

## INTENDED AUDIENCE

See "The Textual Analysis Paper" above.

## FORM / STRUCTURE

The basic form of a research paper is that of a textual analysis paper, with an opening paragraph/s that introduces the work of fiction, a thesis statement, and the main arguments that support the thesis, followed by the body of the paper in which you unfold your arguments, and ending with a conclusion. The only difference is that, the thesis statement and the main arguments are based on collected research, which need to be summarized and explained. Here is the basic structure, adapted for a research paper (note the additions):

1. Opening – introduction of the work under discussion, introduction of research, thesis (the order of these components within the paragraph can be changed)
2. Body of paper – description of collected research and commentary/evaluation of research
3. Conclusion – summary of data and arguments, closure

### 1. Opening

Finding a topic for a research paper can sometimes be easier than finding a topic for a textual analysis paper, because you can rely on the readings of others who wrote about the same work, topic, or author. Still, it is always good to begin your research with a direction or an idea in mind, even if it is vague and general. Here are suggested stages for conducting research:

- Select a topic

As mentioned above, when writing a research paper you may focus on a topic before you begin the

research by using the same methods discussed above in the section about analytical papers. Alternatively, you can also develop your thesis during the research process by reading a variety of articles on the work you write about.

- Frame the topic

Framing the topic helps you narrow down your research, making it more practical to carry out. If, for example, we take our thesis about private property in Goldilocks, we may want to look at similar fairy tales that deal with the sanctity of private property and compare them. We can also frame the thesis more generally by focusing on the story as a “cautionary tale,” and look at other such tales. Alternatively, we can discuss the worth of such a message as part of children literature or look at fairy tales as an educational vehicle in general.

- Survey research on the topic

Once you have framed the topic for research, you can begin to survey the available data using various search methods (library, internet). This is an important stage because a thorough survey will let you gauge the available data on the topic you framed. You may find out that there is not enough information on the topic or that the available information is not adequate, in which case you'll have to frame a different topic. You may also find that there is too much information on the topic, in which case you'll have to narrow it down further.

- Locate and review the research materials

Locating research means making a list of books, articles, and web entries you have identified that deal with the topic you framed. Once you've made that list, begin skimming the contents of the entries you made in order to better determine their usefulness for your research. Arrange the list of entries you found according to their relevance for your research, marking those that best serve it and discarding entries that turn out to be insufficient or irrelevant.

- Develop the topic

With the topic you framed in mind, read through the entries you categorized and take notes that can later be used to write an outline or a rough draft. Do not summarize the articles you identified. Take notes that pertain only to your thesis, leaving out unrelated information.

- Re-evaluate the topic in light of research

Sometimes, after reading through the articles you have identified, and after gaining a deeper grasp of the topic you have framed, your understanding of the story may change, you may gain a different perspective on it, and you may therefore want to re-evaluate your topic and reframe it. Don't be afraid to do it. It is much better to write a paper you are convinced about and believe in than to force your ideas on the text in contrived ways.

Once you have gone through these stages of research, you'll be able to plan your opening paragraph better, present your thesis and introduce the research in support of it more clearly.

## 2. Body of paper

After briefly summarizing/mentioning in the opening paragraph the research you've conducted as it pertains to your thesis, unpack that research in the body of the paper. It may be worth it at this point to write an outline of your paper listing the different arguments you are going to make and fitting the research you conducted into these arguments.

Let's go back again to Goldilocks and let's say that your research paper looks at it as a cautionary tale and compares it to other such tales. In your research, you found several other tales that fit this category, including Little Red Riding Hood, and Hansel and Gretel. You also found a few articles that discuss this kind of tale as part of European folklore. Here is a suggested opening for this kind of paper:

“Goldilocks and the Three Bears” is a cautionary fairy tale that was originally designed to educate little children and inculcate certain values in them through fear. As such, it is part of a group of other folk tales that were popular in central Europe in past centuries. Together with other well-known fairy tales, like Little Red Riding Hood and Hansel and Gretel, this harrowing tale combines scary elements into a suspenseful plot that nearly destroys the protagonists only to save them miraculously in the last moment. The great dangers which the protagonists meet and their remarkable release in the end are aimed at scaring children but also at providing them with a happy ending. The first is a warning, the latter a reward.

Outline of paper -

Summarize the plot of “Goldilocks and the Three Bears” and emphasize its cautionary elements.

Relate the fairy tale to the other tales you found by summarizing those tales as well and then comparing/contrasting them to “Goldilocks.”

Summarize research that discusses the cautionary tale in European folklore.

Combine the previous three parts and explain how the generic conventions of the fairy tale express a specific ideology or educational concerns.

### 3. Conclusion

The conclusion should repeat some of the information from the introduction, but it should also include a summary of the findings and arguments you made in the body of the paper. So while it is a good idea to repeat and reiterate the main points the paper argues, it is also important to present the paper's main argument in a more conclusive fashion that brings it to closure.

Some tips about form and style:

#### Thesis

If you cannot think of more creative ways to state your thesis, resort to the tried, true, and effective opening: “In this paper I will examine .....” It is much better than having a vague or confused thesis or no thesis at all. If you do not present your thesis in the first paragraph, make sure that the first paragraph contains information that is relevant to your thesis and which your thesis relates to, either by

confirming, negating or summarizing it in the following paragraphs.

#### Plot summary

Summarize a plot briefly. A few sentences are enough and will direct the reader to those elements in the text that attracted your attention and which you will be focusing on. When summarizing, try not to describe the action too closely. This can quickly become repetitive and redundant and does not serve much purpose. Quote only to make a point or, in the case of longer quotes, as the basis for a close literary analysis.

#### Analysis

Even if you feel very confident about your insight or interpretation, it is always better to qualify it. Qualification shows respect for the possibility of a different interpretation and does not make you look over-confident, cocky. Instead of stating, “this is the best example of...,” it would be better to write, “this is one of the best examples of...” Instead of stating, “this passage means that...” better write, “one possible meaning of this passage is...” You get the idea.

#### Writing style

Don't be bombastic. Don't make sweeping comments or summaries or overly enthusiastic evaluations, such as, “this story is an excellent/the best example of X” or “The Jewish people were persecuted and victimized throughout their history.” You probably don't have enough information to qualify the first statement and you will be wrong in stating the second. These are just two examples, but since this is probably one of your first encounters with the topics of this course, it's always good to remember how much you don't know, not how much you think you know already. Strive to investigate, research, understand and analyze, but be humble in these efforts by remembering how much wider and deeper the field is and how much of it is still unknown to you.

Write simply and directly. Avoid unnecessarily “big words” and avoid long, convoluted sentences. We all like to show off, to brag about our vocabulary, especially in college. But a rich vocabulary does not necessarily correspond to sophistication and depth of understanding. If your grand vocabulary is not matched by equally deep insights, chances are your essay will look pretentious. Big words without big ideas look fake and ridiculous. Concentrate on the “in” rather than the “sight” in “insight.” Instead of drawing attention to *the way* you write, draw readers' attention to *what* you write.

Finally, here are some fun but pointed writing rules:

1. Don't abbrev.
2. Check to see if you any words out.
3. Be carefully to use adjectives and adverbs correct.
4. About sentence fragments.
5. When dangling, don't use participles.
6. Don't use no double negatives.

7. Each pronoun agrees with their antecedent.
  8. Just between you and I, case is important.
  9. Join clauses good, like a conjunction should.
  10. Don't use commas, that aren't necessary.
  11. Its important to use apostrophe's right.
  12. It's better not to unnecessarily split an infinitive.
  13. Never leave a transitive verb just lay there without an object.
  14. Only Proper Nouns should be capitalized. also a sentence should begin with a capital letter and end with a full stop
  15. Use hyphens in compound-words, not just in any two-word phrase.
  16. In letters compositions reports and things like that we use commas to keep a string of items apart.
  17. Watch out for irregular verbs that have crept into our language.
  18. Verbs has to agree with their subjects.
  19. Avoid repetitive redundancy.
  20. A writer mustn't shift your point of view.
  21. Don't write a run-on sentence you've got to punctuate it.
  22. A preposition isn't a good thing to end a sentence with.
  23. Avoid cliches like the plague.
  24. 1 final thing is never to start a sentence with a number.
  25. Always check your work for accuracy and completeness.
- (<http://www.mantex.co.uk/2009/09/16/26-golden-rules-for-writing-well/>)