

Tips for Writing Formal Essays



- 1) **DO NOT** use complex language just because you think it makes you sound smart! Keep the diction simple and slightly repetitive to make your essay easy to understand. Remember, there's no point to saying something if the audience can't understand you! The best essays are the one's that don't make the reader wonder what you're trying to say.
- 2) **DO NOT** use **PERSONAL PRONOUNS** (e.g. I, we, you, etc.). These suggest that your essay is merely an opinion instead of well-researched fact.
 - ✗ **I think** *Star Wars* is the best movie of all time.
 - ✓ *Star Wars* is the best movie of all time.
- 3) Make sure your essay doesn't sound like an advice column. It is not your job to explain what "you" [the reader] should do or to share personal opinions, but rather to analyze and interpret the text itself.
 - ✗ **You** must overcome past regrets in order to live a happy life.
 - ✓ **One** must overcome past regrets in order to live a happy life.
- 4) **DO NOT** make value judgments in your essay unless stated in the text:
 - ✗ Norman's wife, Jennifer, is a **mean, heartless** woman...
 - ✗ *Star Wars* is the **best** movie of all time. [Impossible to prove! How are you measuring its quality?]
- 5) Formal literary essays are meant to analyze text and present an argument; they are **NOT** meant to be exciting! **DO NOT** use rhetorical devices or creative diction to make your writing sound more interesting. You are **NOT** telling a story!
- 6) When writing a literary essay, the writer is restricted to the boundaries of the text and should **NOT** consider hypothetical situations that explain what the character(s) "could" or "should" have done.
 - ✗ "If Barry had given his daughter, Moira, more freedom in the first place, their relationship would not have experienced problems."
- 7) **DO NOT** ask questions, rhetorical or otherwise, in your essay. Remember, you are trying to answer questions, not ask them.

- 8) In literary essays, write about events from your text(s) in the **PRESENT TENSE**. Remember, these events can be re-experienced any time a reader chooses to open the book(s) in question.
- 9) **DO NOT** use **PARENTHESES** in a formal essay. Presented information in parentheses makes it seem unimportant.
- ✗ "The novel's narrator (**Nick Buchanan**)..."
 - ✓ "The novel's narrator, **Nick Buchanan**, ..."
- 10) **DO NOT** use **CONTRACTIONS**.
- ✗ don't, can't, won't, couldn't, etc.
 - ✓ do not, can not, will not, could not, etc.
- 11) Write out numbers less than one hundred and numbers such as one thousand, one million, etc.
- ✗ 18; 1,000; 1,000,000; etc.
 - ✓ eighteen, one thousand, one million, etc.
- 12) **DO NOT** use **SLANG** or **INFORMAL LANGUAGE**.
- ✗ "The movie was **sick!**"
 - ✗ cuz, @, u, 2, re:, BTW, etc.
- 13) Avoid using **VAGUE** language in your essays. Be as specific as possible with your diction. Make sure you're being clear what "it" is.
- ✗ stuff, things, guy, it, etc.
- 14) Some important terminology...
- the person telling the story is the "**NARRATOR**," not the "**AUTHOR**."
 - refer to unnamed characters as "protagonist," "narrator," etc.
 - a longer fictional text is referred to as a "**NOVEL**," not a "**BOOK**."
- 15) The best literary essays treat the material with which they are concerned as **EVENTS**, not simply texts, novels or stories. This strongly influences the diction used to write an essay.
- ✗ "In this quotation..."
 - ✗ "The texts being compared are..."
 - ✗ "This quotation proves..." [Quotations don't **PROVE** anything; they **SUPPORT**. Your explanations do the proving.]

- 16) Always deal with your "points" in the same order as you've mentioned them in the introductory paragraph. For example, the first "point" mentioned in the introductory paragraph should be the topic of your first body paragraph.
- 17) In order to maintain a well-organized essay, always deal with texts in the same order. For example, if the introductory paragraph states, "In the short stories 'The Elephant' and 'Mirror Image'...", your body paragraphs must always deal with them in that order.
- 18) A comparative essay's introductory paragraph should **NOT** contain any specific information about the text(s), such as the names of characters or plot summaries. Leave the specifics for the body paragraphs!
- 19) Information expressed in the sentences of an introductory paragraph of a formal literary English essay must always follow a particular order and sequence:
 - i) hook sentence(s)
 - ii) titles and authors' names
 - iii) three "points" [either listed together in one sentence or each in its own sentence]
 - iv) thesis statement/theme [Your thesis statement and theme may be the same.]
- 20) When writing either a progressive or divergent style of comparison essay, the examples/quotations you select from each story need to reflect how **ONE** character progresses through the stages of dealing with the same problem/conflict .
- 21) Each body paragraph should begin with a **TOPIC SENTENCE** telling the reader what the paragraph will be explaining and/or proving.
- 22) Following the topic sentence in each paragraph, present all information about one text to prove your "point" before turning to the next. **DO NOT** flip back and forth between texts in a body paragraph.
- 23) Always use the same number of quotations for each text in each body paragraph. For example, if you use one quotation from your first text to support the point in your first body paragraph, you can only use one quotation for each text in each body paragraph. However, if you use two, you must use two for each.

- 24) Each quotation you integrate into your essay should follow the **CONTEXT·QUOTATION·EXPLANATION** format. Don't state several quotations, then explain their significance together.
- 25) The contexts for quotations in the first body paragraph will usually be longer, because they need to introduce important details, such as characters, conflicts and plot elements.
- 26) In your body paragraphs, be as **DETAILED** and **SPECIFIC** as possible when explaining and supporting your evidence/quotations. **NEVER** assume that the reader is going to make the connections you want him/her to. It is your responsibility to make sure the reader understands how your evidence/quotations prove your "points."
- ✗ "Obviously, this quotation proves..." [Nothing is "obvious" until you explain it.]
 - ✗ "This shows..." [An example/quotation doesn't "show" anything on its own; the writer needs to explain **HOW** it "proves" what he/she wants it to.]
- 27) Never assume that your reader is familiar with the text(s) you're writing about. Write as if they have no knowledge about them at all.
- 28) In a literary essay, **DO NOT** simply summarize your novel(s)!
- 29) Use **TRANSITIONS** to move smoothly from one idea to the next and more easily communicate the relationship between the content of one sentence and the next (see "Transition Words" handout).
- ✓ in addition, firstly, for example, similarly, likewise, lastly, etc.
- 30) Use **KEY WORDS** from your thesis and "points" in your topic sentences, concluding sentences and concluding paragraph to help the reader see and make the connections.
- 31) A **CONCLUDING SENTENCE** at the end of each body paragraph in a comparison essay should restate the paragraph's "point." It should **NOT** be worded exactly the same as the topic sentence!
- 32) **NEVER** bring up new information in your concluding paragraph. Your concluding paragraph is simply intended to restate your thesis and "points" and wrap-up the essay.