

How to Write an Essay

Central Idea

- The **central idea** of your essay is a **statement about the major idea or theme of a work of literature.**
- **In other words, the central idea is what you are trying to prove.**

Area of Support

Areas of support are **points or topics within a literary work** that can be **developed as paragraphs** in support of the central idea.

For example, in Liam O’Flaherty’s short story, “The Sniper,” O’Flaherty suggests the horror of war. By reading the story carefully, we would be able to find the following areas of support:

- Physical dangers
- Psychological effects

Thesis

The thesis is the **controlling idea** of the essay. Here is the equation for the thesis:

Thesis = Central Idea + Areas of Support

(**the areas of support MUST be written in the order that you plan to present them in your essay!)

Here is the shape of a thesis statement:

Central Idea

Areas of Support

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

Use a “**connector**” between the central idea and areas of support:

(central idea) IS REVEALED BY (area of support)
IS SUGGESTED BY
IS MADE CLEAR THROUGH

(area of support) REVEALS (central idea)
SUGGESTS
MAKES CLEAR

Sub-Thesis (Topic Sentence)

topic sentence = sub-thesis statement in an essay

Here is the equation for the sub-thesis:

Sub-Thesis = One area of support + reference to central idea

(again, use a connector between the area of support and the central idea)

Example: Liam O'Flaherty suggests the horror of war first by presenting the physical dangers associated with war.

Each body paragraph in your essay needs to begin with a **clear, complete sub-thesis.**

Introduction

Functions of an Introduction

- Introduce your reader to basic background information about the literary work
- Introduce your reader to the thesis

Necessary Elements of an Introduction

- 1) **Title and type of literary work** – e.g., novel, short story, poem, play, etc.

Example: In Langston Hughes' poem entitled "Theme for English B," the poem's speaker is a twenty-two year old black college student...

- 2) **Author's full name** should be given the first time ONLY (thereafter, you should refer to the author by last name only).

Example: In Liam O'Flaherty's "The Sniper," O'Flaherty suggests...

- 3) **Brief description of the setting** (i.e., era and locale) unless inappropriate (as in the case of some poems).
- 4) **Characters should be identified as characters** the first time they are mentioned (which should happen in the first paragraph).

Example: Ralph, Jack, and Simon, three of the main characters, take a tour of the island...

- 5) A **brief orientation to the story** should be provided (just enough information about the story line to make your essay understandable to your reader – DO NOT SUMMARIZE the entire work!).
- 6) **Thesis statement** – should be the last sentence of your introductory paragraph

Conclusion

The conclusion leaves the reader convinced that:

- Your thesis has been supported.
- The argument that you have made has led to some deeper understanding of the text.

Specific Strategies for Writing Conclusions

- 1) Rephrase your thesis statement.
- 2) Discuss the larger message of the text as a whole.
- 3) End with an embellishment, such as a particularly apt quotation or questions that indirectly support your thesis. Make sure that you integrate this quotation into your conclusion – it must not stand alone.

*Example: By her characterization of Walter Lee, Hansberry raises the black male above the typical stereotype. Walter is not a social problem, a mere victim of patriarchy. Rather, Hansberry creates a character who struggles with his fate and rises above it. In doing so, she elevates Walter Lee above narrow stereotypes, representing him as a fully rounded and psychologically complex human being. As James Baldwin puts it in **Notes of a Native Son**, “Time has made some changes in the Negro face.”*

Note: As the example suggests, more than one of these strategies may be used at one time.

Transitions

- **Words, phrases, or sentences which connect** what you are about to discuss with what you were discussing previously
- **Transitions are a verbal and logical bridge between ideas** that you provide in order to help your reader move from one topic to the next
- **Location:** at the beginnings of paragraphs AND between ideas within paragraphs.

Textual Support

When you write your essays, **you will be asked to provide textual supports** for your thesis and sub-theses.

- Textual supports MUST be **presented in the form of quotations** taken from the literary work.
- “Quote” means that you **EXACTLY** repeat the words of the author. Be careful that you are **precise**.
- **Quotations should agree in verb tense, gender, and number with your discussion.** Any changes made to the quotations should be noted with **[brackets]**.

- **The rules for using quotations can be summarized as follows:**
 - **Introduce.** Explain what is happening in the text when the quotation occurs; introduce any characters and situations so that a reader who has not read the text understands what is going on.
 - **Integrate.** “Embed” the quotation into your own sentence. *Do NOT EVER let a quotation stand alone as a sentence.*
 - **Explicate.** Make a connection between the quotation and your controlling idea. How does the quotation suggest that your controlling idea is true? (this is referred to as “**analysis**”)
- **Quotations should be cut** to the necessary words that prove the point being made. **A good rule of thumb is five to ten words.**

Example of Integrated Quotations

(***please note, analysis is NOT included in the following paragraphs!)

The sniper is in a particularly dangerous location. He is “on a rooftop near O’Connell Bridge,” and he alertly watches for his enemies as “the long June twilight [fades] into night.” (narrative; uses quotations written in present tense; note that the quotation is NOT separated by a comma)

As he takes aim at the sniper across the road, his “arm [pains] him like a thousand devils.” After he sees the other sniper fall from the rooftop and land grotesquely in the road below, he “[utters] a cry of joy.” (narrative; uses quotations written in present tense; note that the quotation is NOT separated by a comma)

The war soon begins to take its toll on him: “He began to gibber to himself, cursing the war, cursing himself, cursing everybody.” (introduction written in present tense, followed by a colon and then the sentence in its entirety)

Lady Macbeth then utters her immortal words, “‘Out, damned spot, out, I say...yet who would have thought the old man to have had so much blood in him?’” (when you employ a direct quotation, use a comma and then a single quotation mark inside a double quotation mark)

A few notes on these examples:

- Note that the period or comma appears **INSIDE** the quotation mark. Example: "...cry of joy."
- Bracket the word that needs to be changed. For example: "uttered" becomes "[utters]."

Analysis

Definition: Analysis is an explanation of why your quotations help prove your thesis. In other words, how does your quotation relate back to your thesis?

- **Analysis is the backbone of your essay!** Without it, your essay simply becomes a list of quotations that have no meaning for the reader.
- **Location: *****
 - In the same sentence as your quotation
 - In the sentence after your quotation
 - After a series of related quotations

***The more you practice the craft of writing, the easier this decision will be.

Examples of Analysis

“On a rooftop near the O’Connell Bridge,” a Republican sniper waits to kill his “enemies.” His position is dangerous because from his elevated outlook, he could be spotted in the twilight and quickly surrounded, or he could be killed in the crossfire.

The sniper is described as a “fanatic.” O’Flaherty uses this description because the sniper is zealous and takes his cause to the extreme. He turns himself into a killing machine that is energized by death.

When he hears the “panting” of the armored car’s motor, his “heart [beats] faster” at the opportunity to kill an enemy. War has distorted his mind, making killing into a grotesque game.

The sniper finds himself in a situation of having to kill a woman: “She was pointing to the roof where the sniper lay. An informer.”