

How to Write a Critical Literary Essay

The introduction

Introductions to critical literary essays take the same general form as introductions to any other type of expository or persuasive essay. They start with a general statement and end with a specific statement. The specific statement ending the introduction of a persuasive or critical literary essay is usually the thesis; more on this shortly.

How general should you make the opening of your introduction? How specific should you make your thesis?

This is, as with many aspects of writing, a judgment call. In general the answer is, not so broad that you are vague about your topic and not so specific that you have no room to develop your essay. In practical terms it's easy to be too general when you start your introduction, but very difficult to be too specific when you write your thesis.

This opening is too broad for a critical literary essay:

A lot of authors have written about modern man in many different ways. Some of these authors think modern man is good and others think he is not so good.

A more direct opening:

Herman Melville and Fyodor Dostoevsky, both writing in the nineteenth century, explored in their fiction the nature of man. Melville, in his story, "Bartelby the Scrivener," and Dostoevsky, in his prose manifesto, "Notes from the Underground," focus on two very different "modern men" who were unhappy with their lives.

Note: Make sure that your introduction includes, as in the previous example, the titles and authors of the main works you will deal with in your essay.

Topic versus thesis

A topic is the subject about which you are writing. A thesis is the specific point you are making about the topic. Of a thesis it is reasonable to say that it is true or false, or that you agree or disagree with it. It does not make sense to say a topic is true or false.

Strong theses

In order to write a thoughtful, in-depth essay, you'll need to do more than meet the minimum requirements for a thesis. You will have to develop a clear, strong, interesting thesis.

Let's begin by taking a look at some weak theses:

Melville and Dostoevsky both use symbols to represent their views of modern man.

Big Boy's story parallels the story of all black men of his generation in the way he thinks, speaks, and acts.

Dostoevsky's Underground Man and Kafka's Gregor Samsa both clearly symbolize their authors' philosophies.

These theses are weak because they are vague and superficial. You would not even have had to have read the works in question to come up with them. Theses such as these show a lack of time spent on the assignment or a lack of understanding of the material. In either case, writers who never go beyond this level will probably write superficial, trite papers.

A strong thesis, on the other hand, shows a depth of understanding of the work in question. It speaks of things not merely resting on the surface of the stories. It requires original thought, and it makes clear, focused statements about what the essay will discuss. Remember: A strong thesis is not merely a rewording of an assigned topic.

Examples of strong theses:

*Although *Bartelby* and *the Underground Man* are both alienated from their society, they suffer their alienation in radically different ways: *Bartelby* gradually withdraws from all human contact in an attempt to fade into the background of life, while *the Underground Man* rages against the world because he feels he has already faded out of existence.*

“The Dead” is Joyce’s metaphor for the lifeless gaiety of Dublin society, the hopelessness of lost love, and the brutality of passing time.

See the difference.

Primary and secondary sources

A primary source is the work at the center of your topic and thesis. Secondary sources are works by one author about another author’s works. For example, if you are writing about Kafka’s *The Metamorphosis*, then *The Metamorphosis* is your **primary** source. Vladimir Nabokov’s lectures on *The Metamorphosis* are a **secondary** source for *The Metamorphosis*.

Points to consider in using primary and secondary sources:

- If you are reading a primary source in translation, and there is more than one version or translation, you’ll have to make a decision on which version is best. This can be difficult to do if you don’t speak or read the language of the original. In that case you’ll have to find what scholars think about the competing translations, and base your judgment on that information. Otherwise, any primary source is as good as the next, as long as the text is complete.
- Secondary sources are trickier. You have to judge which sources are more scholarly, more serious. This can be difficult if you are not well acquainted with the field. In that case, you should consult your instructor. You can also check the Works Cited pages of the books and articles you are considering for inclusion in your paper. If certain authors and works turn up in these lists again and again, then they are probably worth looking at.
- Finding primary and secondary sources: One way to find these sources is to search a library’s catalog. A search under the **author’s name** heading should yield **primary** sources. A search using the author’s name under the **subject heading** should yield **secondary** sources.
- In addition, as previously mentioned, you should also look at the Works Cited pages of books and articles you read; those are a great source for leads.

Developing a literary thesis

Developing a literary thesis in-depth in an essay is difficult. In order to write a thoughtful and interesting literary essay, you must immerse yourself in the subject. Although there are no hard-and-fast rules that will assure you of writing a good literary essay, the following steps are good guidelines to follow:

1. Read the primary source(s) more than once. The second time through, take notes on the work(s).
2. Do not focus on the paper you must write. Instead, concentrate on the work you are reading. Ask yourself questions like: How does this story make me feel? Do I feel one way in one part and a different way in another? Why do I feel like this? Remember, literature, especially great literature, should not be read merely with the mind, but with the emotions as well.
3. The second time you read the primary source, gear your reading toward those elements of the work that deal with your thesis. Do the same with your secondary sources.

4. Ask yourself if your thesis is obvious to anyone who has read the work. Don't opt for the simplest or easiest thesis; Odds are that somebody else has already done the same, and instructors are generally not favorably inclined toward a paper that doesn't stand out from the crowd; more importantly, your paper will be boring.
5. As with writing any essay, stay on track! If you tell your reader in your introduction that you are going to speak about a topic, then do so. Write about what you say you are going to write about—nothing more, nothing less.

Ultimately, how deeply and elegantly you develop your literary thesis will depend on how much you like and understand the material. While you cannot *make* yourself like the material, you can try to understand it. If that's the best, you can do, then do it.

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