

BLM 9 – Guide to Writing a Literary Essay

The purpose of literary essays is to argue and prove a point about literature (sometimes using one piece of text, sometimes synthesizing two or more texts). The argument itself is expressed in the form of a thesis statement, and the proof lies throughout the body of the essay. A typical simple literary essay structure is multi-paragraphed and includes an introduction, body paragraphs, and a conclusion.

Paragraph	What it should do
Introduction	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • engage the reader • give a context for your topic – state title(s) and author(s), some background to the literature and some background to the topic • express thesis statement
Body Paragraph 1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • start with a transition sentence • develop the strongest set of proof, or the first in chronological order, for thesis statement; give background, state your point in a topic sentence, introduce example, integrate quotation from the piece, and relate back to the thesis statement • conclude paragraph
Body Paragraph 2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • start with a transition sentence • develop second strongest set of proof, or the second in chronological order, for thesis statement; give background, state your point in a topic sentence, introduce example, integrate quotation from the piece, and relate back to the thesis statement • conclude paragraph
Body Paragraph 3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • start with a transition sentence • develop third-strongest set of proof, or the second in chronological order, for thesis statement; give background, state your point in a topic sentence, introduce example, integrate quotation from the piece, and relate back to the thesis statement • conclude paragraph
Conclusion	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • start with a transition sentence • discuss the logical conclusion of the proof you have presented in the body paragraphs • tie all loose ends together • come up with a really strong concluding sentence to end the essay

Developing Thesis Statements

Thesis statements are integral to the essay; the better they are, the better the essay is. Here are some tips on developing thesis statements.

- A thesis statement summarizes briefly the argument that you will be proving in your essay. Here is an example:

Richard Wagamese’s novel Keeper’n Me is the story of Garnet’s struggle to create an identity for himself after growing up part from his cultural roots – he creates this identity through forging relationships with his long-lost family, finding his own history, and embracing his Ojibway culture.

This a thesis statement because it names the topic, presents a provable argument, and lists the main points. The following is **not** a thesis statement:

In this essay I will write about identity in Keeper’n Me.

This is not a thesis statement because it simply names a topic, the word “essay” is mentioned, and no argument is broached.

- Thesis statements explain the writer’s purpose, answer questions, and provide solutions rather than posing questions.
- You may use “I” in a thesis statement (unless it is a formal essay), but you may not mention the word “essay.”
- A good thesis statement is direct and straightforward – it may be a well-developed sentence, but it is easy to understand.
- Sometimes it is easier to begin a thesis sentence with a preposition (as, because, until, although, when, while, however, therefore) in an introductory clause. For example,
While Keeper’n Me seems at first glance to be purely about Garnet’s search for identity, the novel also explores our need, as human beings, to be part of a greater whole – in Garnet’s case, his Ojibway community.
- A particularly good thesis statement takes the topic given and narrows it, making it very specific and different from other papers written on the same topic.
- Generally, a thesis statement appears at the end of the first paragraph of an essay, so that readers will have a clear idea of what to expect as they read.
- It **avoids** vague language like “it seems.”
- It should pass the “so what? or who cares?” test. (Would your most honest friend respond with “But everyone knows that”?) For instance, to say, “Garnet is a character in the novel,” would be unlikely to evoke any opposition.

Transitions

Transitions are needed from sentence to sentence, and from paragraph to paragraph. Transitions make the flow of any written piece smooth and easy to follow, by avoiding abrupt changes in topic. Here is a list of linking words that are helpful in making transitions:

For...	Try these linking words:
Cause-effect	as a result, because, consequently, for this reason, however, since, therefore, thus
Compare	although, by contrast, compared with (to), even though, however, in the same way, likewise, on the other hand, similarly
Conclusion	finally, in short, in summary, then, therefore, to summarize
Emphasis	again, also, equally important, furthermore, in addition, in fact, moreover
Explanation	because, for example, for instance, for this reason, in other words, in particular, since, specifically
Importance	equally important, finally, first, second, third, lastly, most importantly, next
Time	after, afterward, as, at last, before, during, finally, just then, later, meanwhile, next, once, since, soon, suddenly, then, while

Editing

Editing is an important part of the writing process. It can be undertaken by the writer or by someone else. A common pitfall when editing is to focus just on fixing spelling and grammar, rather than focusing on the essay as a whole – what needs more work, what is missing. This checklist can be helpful – editors can go through the checklist to find missing components, or parts that could use more work.

- Read through the completed rough draft. Look for sentence fragments, run-on sentences, spelling errors, and phrases that do not make sense.
- Look closely at your introduction. Does it begin by engaging the reader?
- What are you writing about? Be sure to let your audience know the context of your essay in the introduction. If you are writing about a poem/story/article/novel/movie, the title should be included and properly punctuated. The author/poet/director/actors should also be listed. Be sure that this information is included in complete sentences.
- Does your introduction end with a thesis statement? Sometimes it is easier to add the thesis statement after writing the essay, but only if you are able to focus the essay.
- Is your introduction at least 5-8 sentences in length? If not, you may not have included enough detail.
- Look closely at each body paragraph. Does each body paragraph begin with a transition sentence?
- Is there an example/quotation in each body paragraph? If not, include one. Be sure to explain why that example/quotation is evidence for that paragraph. Also be sure to punctuate your quotations properly and to integrate them smoothly into the paragraph. (Adding examples and quotations helps, especially when your paragraphs are too short.)
- Does each body paragraph include a topic sentence that explains the point of that paragraph?

- Look at the length of each body paragraph. Is it fully developed? If not, add more detail.
- Look back at your thesis statement. Does each body paragraph help to prove that it is true?
- Look at your conclusion. Does it begin with a transition sentence?
- Does the conclusion end with a restatement of the thesis in different words?
- Are there any loose ends left hanging in your essay? If so, the conclusion is the place to tie them together.
- Is the conclusion at least 5 sentences in length?
- Now, read through your essay one more time. Does it have “flow”? (i.e., When you read it out-loud to yourself, does it sound nice? ...does the language provide a continuous message with no abrupt changes? ...does it seem choppy?) If not, add words and phrases to give it flow. Make sure there is some variety to your sentence length and structure.

Sample Holistic Rubric for Assessing Essays

6	The essay is superior and may draw upon any number of factors, such as maturity of style, depth of discussion, effectiveness of argument, use of literary and rhetorical devices, sophistication of wit, or quality of imagination. This composition exhibits an effective writing style and a sophisticated use of language. Despite its clarity and precision, this paper need not be error-free.
5	The essay is proficient . The composition displays some manipulation of language to achieve a desired effect and exhibits a clear sense of voice and of audience. Content is thoughtful and interesting. Vocabulary and sentence structure are varied and serve the writer’s purpose successfully. Errors may be present but are not distracting.
4	The essay is clearly competent . The composition conveys the writer’s ideas, but without flair or strong control. Diction and syntax are usually appropriate, but lack variety. Structure, regardless of type, is predictable and relatively mechanical. The paper shows a clear sense of the writer’s purpose but is not engaging. Conventions of language are usually followed, but some errors are evident.
3	The essay is barely adequate . The paper may feature underdeveloped or simplistic ideas. Transition[s] may be weak or absent. Support is frequently in the form of listed details. Little variety in diction and sentence structure is discernible. The composition may reflect some sense of purpose, but errors may be distracting
2	The essay is inadequate . The ideas are underdeveloped and simply or awkwardly expressed. The composition may be excessively colloquial or reflect inadequate knowledge of the conventions of language. While meaning is apparent, errors are frequent and rudimentary.
1	The essay is unacceptable and may be compromised by its deficiency of composition, content, diction, syntax, structure, or conventions of language.
0	The essay is a complete misunderstanding of the task, is off-topic, or is simply a restatement of the topic.