PAUL HEADRICK

THE WILEY GUIDE TO

WRITING ESSAYS ABOUT LITERATURE

WILEY Blackwell

The Wiley Guide to Writing Essays about Literature

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Paul Headrick

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Preface

For many students, literary analysis essays are a mystery. First-year students commonly want to know such things as how their essays should begin, whether they must agree with what other critics have said, and whether they should include their personal responses. *The Wiley Guide to Writing Essays about Literature* answers such questions. It provides clarity by explaining the literary analysis essay's purpose and guiding students through its structure, using exercises, examples of essay components, and sample essays.

The sample essays in Appendix 2 are a crucial component of the book. After completing each chapter of the book and answering some of the exercise questions, consider reviewing one of the essays and noting how it demonstrates the writing principles that the chapter explains. When you gain confidence, you should think about how the sample essays could be improved.

In literary studies, ideas matter, and there is an important connection between structure in an essay and analytical content—the essay's ideas. When you understand how to structure your essays, you will develop more effective analysis, and you will be more successful in your literary studies.

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1

Audience and the Literary Analysis Essay

The Importance of Audience

To communicate effectively, you need to know your audience. The audiences for different kinds of writing can vary a great deal. They may be very literate, or they may be made up of people who are just beginning to learn to read. They may be composed of experts in your specific area, or absolute beginners, or a mixture of both. There are many other ways in which audiences differ, requiring different approaches to writing in order to be effective.

You probably already have some experience adjusting the way you write in order to respond to your sense of your audience. You would not write the same way in a note to a roommate as you would in a memo to a boss. You also probably have some sound ideas about the audience for academic essays and how that audience affects the way you should write. Most students, for example, know that their readers expect a certain degree of formality. They know that their audience is at least as literate as they are.

What makes writing effective depends on the purpose of the audience, so to write well you must understand that purpose. One of the most common pieces of advice given to writers—whether they are writing essays, newspaper stories, or novels—is to be interesting. It is good advice. What you write will have little impact if it bores readers so much that they won't read it. It may not be obvious, however, what makes something interesting to a particular audience.

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Read the following sentences and consider which is the most interesting. Which one would make you want to read further?

1. "It was a bright cold day in April, and the clocks were striking thirteen" (Orwell 4).
2. One strategy works better than any other for those trying to find dancing partners in the nightclubs of Vienna.
3. Franz Kafka's short story "A Country Doctor" is a complex investigation of the place of religion and science in the culture of the modern West.
4. There are three keys to writing successful literary analysis essays.

If your purpose is to find engrossing but serious entertainment, sentence 1, the first sentence of George Orwell's novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, might be the most interesting. If you like to dance and are planning a trip by yourself to Vienna, or if you are simply interested in Austrian culture or dancing in general, sentence 2 will probably be the most interesting to you. Similarly, how interesting you find the other sentences will depend to a large degree on what your purpose is before you begin reading. If you want to know more about the meaning of Kafka's "A Country Doctor," then you are likely to be interested in sentence 3. Since you are reading this book, you probably care about writing essays about literature, in which case you might find sentence 4 the most interesting, if only for the moment.

Key Points

- Writers need to know who their audience is.
- Writers need to know and respond to the purpose of their audience.

The Audience for the Literary Analysis Essay

The purpose of the audience for the literary analysis essay is to explore the meaning of literary texts. Specific beliefs and expectations are connected to this purpose.

The audience believes that literature is important. It is not easy to say why literature has the importance it does, but we can observe that in many different cultures, in many different eras, it has commanded people's

attention and moved them. Literature is a central, vital part of most modern societies. People do debate which literary texts are important and deserve our special attention, and the participants in this debate agree on the fundamental idea of literature's importance. One way that the importance of literary study is demonstrated is by the position universities give to it. In most universities in Canada and the United States, students must complete at least an introductory course involving literary analysis in order to obtain a bachelor's degree, whether in the arts, the sciences, or even professional programs such as nursing and engineering. The bachelor's degree, no matter what the discipline, signifies a certain range of understanding of ourselves and our world; the common requirement that literary study be part of the undergraduate degree demonstrates its widely accepted importance.

The audience for the literary analysis essay also believes that literature is complicated. We want to understand the things that are important to us, but at the same time as literature feels important, its complexity makes it mysterious. Its meanings are expressed indirectly. These meanings are subtle, sometimes contradictory, even changing. The combination of literature's importance and its complexity is what makes it worth reading, rereading, and studying—both for you and your audience. Concentrating on your audience's purpose—to explore that complexity in your writing—will help you to focus your essays effectively.

More needs to be said, however, about the audience's interest in the meaning of literary texts. Here are some key ideas about your audience. Each point has important consequences for you as you write your essay.

1. The audience for your essay believes that literary texts can be poems, plays, stories, and novels, but the category may also include films, graphic novels, and other texts that communicate with images or sounds.

   Consequence: The analytical techniques that apply to texts traditionally thought of as literary also apply to texts that have elements other than words.
2. The audience for your essay has already read (or viewed) the literary text you are writing about, and, on at least a simple level, has understood it.

   Consequence: Your audience will not be interested in summaries of plots, descriptions of settings, lists of characters, paraphrases of

conversations, and so on. Your audience knows these things already and will be bored by your repeating them.

3. The audience for your essay believes that literary texts express important ideas in subtle and complicated ways.

   Consequence: Your audience accepts the idea that there is much more to say about a literary text than what is contained in a summary. It expects your essay to deal with features of the text that are not obvious.

4. The audience for your essay wants to know more about the ideas of the literary text you are writing about and how those ideas are expressed.

   Consequence: You do not have to establish how good or interesting the literary text is. Your essay should focus on an idea expressed by the literary text.

5. The audience for your essay believes that not only the main features of a text but also its smallest details are potentially important and meaningful.

   Consequence: In order for your analysis to be convincing, you should be prepared to consider details such as word choice, the arrangement of words on the page, or individual images.

6. The audience for your essay believes that the complexity of literary texts generates different meanings, and that these meanings can change when texts are read in different historical contexts.

   Consequence: There is always more to be said about literary texts. You do not need to worry that because several essays have already been written on a particular text, your audience will be uninterested in reading yet another analysis.

7. The audience for your essay believes that differing views about a literary text can be legitimate.

   Consequence: You do not need to worry about what the "right" interpretation of a text is and whether your analysis agrees with it.

8. The audience for your essay believes that although differing views about a literary text can be legitimate, your interpretation does not merit serious consideration just because you believe it.

   Consequence: Your audience will not be interested in an interpretation that is based simply on what you "feel" is the text's meaning. Your interpretation must be *convincing*. You must prove that your interpretation makes sense, supporting your claims with evidence and analysis.

9. The audience for your essay is highly literate.

   Consequence: The language of your literary analysis essay must be technically correct, clear, and effective. Your audience will not be impressed by artificially difficult vocabulary or needlessly complex sentences, but it will expect your essay to use abstract language and terms specific to literary analysis with a high degree of precision.

There is an important sense in which there is another, separate audience for your literary analysis essay. This second audience shares the beliefs listed above, but it adds a different kind of expectation. The second audience is the instructor who is marking your essay. Your instructor will be evaluating your essay in part by considering how well it demonstrates an understanding of its hypothetical audience, but unlike that audience, she or he has a duty to read on, even if your analysis fails to be interesting or convincing. You should keep a few points in mind about your instructor as an audience.

1. Your instructor believes that an understanding of key concepts of literary analysis introduced in the course contributes to successful interpretations of texts.

   Consequence: You should make careful note when new ideas are introduced in your course, whether they have to do with the specific literary texts you are discussing or literature in general. In an introductory course, for instance, you might hear a lecture that includes a definition of a literary device and shows its importance in a text. You should be alert to instances where the same or similar devices occur in the text you are analyzing, and you should demonstrate that you have mastered the concept by including it as evidence in your essay.
2. Your instructor has limited time.

   Consequence: Be clear. Clarity is obviously important for the hypothetical audience of your essay; it is just as important for your instructor. Sometimes students write essays in which it is not clear how the analysis relates to the thesis, or even which of several assigned topics has been chosen. A reader with a great deal of time and an incentive to understand your work might, on careful rereading, see how an unclear argument actually makes sense and is convincing. Your instructor does have an obligation to read your essay carefully, but you should not think that this obligation makes clarity any less important. Your instructor will be evaluating for clarity, and your instructor also needs

to complete the marking of your essay and get on to others. A reader with limited time is more likely to overlook arguments that are worthwhile but difficult to follow. When composing the final draft of your essay, imagine that your instructor will be marking it after having already read twenty such essays and with twenty more still to go. Work hard to be clear so that it is easy for your instructor to understand your essay and give your ideas the credit they deserve.

3. Your instructor knows that you are a student.

   Consequence: You do not need to worry about whether your essay is absolutely original or whether you understand everything that is relevant to the text you are analyzing. The level of understanding that your essay demonstrates will be evaluated appropriately for the level of study at which you are working. Students sometimes begin English literature courses with the sense that they are terrible at literary analysis. You should be confident that your classmates share your sense that you are engaged in something difficult, and that your instructor's job is to introduce you to techniques for beginning to deal with that difficulty. Do not worry if the analysis you produce seems less sophisticated than that of the literary critics you read.

If you think further about the audience for the essay and what it is interested in, you can come up with examples of statements that will be off topic and uninteresting, such as statements about how important the story is to your life or how relevant the story is to issues in the world. Such statements are perfectly appropriate in a different context, but they are out of place in a literary analysis essay written for an audience with a focused interest in the meaning of a literary text.

Key Points

- The audience for literary analysis essays wants to know about the meaning of literary texts.
- The audience for literary analysis essays believes that literature is complicated and important.
- The specific expectations of the audience have important consequences for the content of literary analysis essays.

Exercise Set 1.1 Understanding Audience

In Exercises 1.1 A and 1.1 B, indicate whether each sentence would provoke the specific interest of the audience for a literary analysis essay.

Exercise 1.1 A (Answers are in Appendix 4)

1. John Webb's poem "Columbia River" made me cry.
2. "Columbia River" is one of John Webb's best poems.
3. The speaker of John Webb's poem "Columbia River" recalls standing on a pinnacle, looking down at the river.
4. "Columbia River," by John Webb, is about a trip the author really took to the Columbia River.
5. In John Webb's "Columbia River," the speaker connects love to nature.

Exercise 1.1 B

1. Protecting the environment is one of the most important issues that all humanity must face.
2. There is a slight but significant shift in the speaker's attitude to love between each of the three quatrains of "Columbia River."
3. The irregular end rhymes of John Webb's "Columbia River" subtly reinforce the poem's humility with respect to the natural world.
4. In person, the poet John Webb is a man of sophistication and wit.
5. The best of the three quatrains of John Webb's "Columbia River" is the last.

Exercise 1.1 C

1. Write three different statements that refer to a literary text you are studying in class but which do not respond to the interests of the audience for the literary analysis essay. Give a brief explanation of why each statement would be uninteresting to such an audience.

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