WRITING PAPERS THAT ANALYZE LITERATURE

INTRODUCTION—SETTING UP A PROBLEM
Your essay should be dealing with some kind of problem in the work or works you analyze. This may be something puzzling in the text itself—something unusual or unexpected, a character behaving in a strange way, or a scene or action that doesn’t seem to add up, to fit with the rest. Many feminist critics who have published essays on *Frankenstein*, for instance, started their thinking in relation to what seemed a puzzling aspect of the book to them: Why would Mary Shelley, a woman writer, make her women characters so passive and unmemorable? Is there a reason for this? Is there anything about *Frankenstein* that marks it particularly as a woman’s novel? Or perhaps you’re puzzled about whether Victor actually changes as a result of his experiences. At the beginning, he seems to want to warn Walton about the dangers of scientific pursuit, yet at the end of the novel, he urges Walton and his men to continue their journey. Why? Or maybe you’re interested in the creature himself. Is he a reliable narrator? Is he to be trusted? We might remember, for example, that Satan in *Paradise Lost* was a particularly eloquent, persuasive being. . .

Or, it may be something that involves a comparison between two or more works: How does a modern adaptation such as the film *Edward Scissorhands* reinterpret the Frankenstein story? Are there more similarities between Frankenstein’s creature and Adam in *Paradise Lost* or between the creature and Satan? How did a previous text, such as Mary Wollstonecraft’s *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* influence *Frankenstein*? Where in the novel do you see the influences of this important treatise written by the author’s mother?

Or perhaps the problem you’re dealing with is an issue that has puzzled previous critics and motivated wildly differing interpretations: Is Mary Shelley’s view of nature and the natural world in line with the views of her male Romantic counterparts, or does she offer a different outlook? Does Shelley want us to believe that Victor is correct in destroying his female creation or wrong in doing so?
How does your answer to this question affect your ideas about Shelley’s presentation of gender in the novel? If you had to name a classic, Aristotelian tragic hero in the novel, would it be Victor or the creature?

Don’t be afraid of choosing a narrow, focused topic. Students are sometimes reluctant to do this for a couple of reasons: 1) it’s harder work to find something to write about that’s less obvious; and 2) students often feel they’re not dealing with the most pressing issues in the book if they choose a narrow topic. But often, a narrow topic can serve as a window into larger issues in a book. I’ve had students write wonderful papers on topics such as images of shoes in the contemporary Native American novel *Tracks* or the importance of food in Maxine Hong Kingston’s 1976 memoir, *The Woman Warrior*.

Also don’t be afraid of choosing as your topic some historical or cultural subtext or problem in the work. Perhaps you’re interested in how Shelley utilizes contemporary theories of science in *Frankenstein*. The sources you find in this case might not be conventional literary critical sources that offer readings of the novel—they might well be historical sources that explain the scientific study of electricity or chemistry in the early 19th century. Your inclusion of these sources should then shed light on what you believe Shelley is doing with or saying about science in the novel.

Your introduction should make it clear to the reader what problem you’re tackling in the paper. Your thesis should be your ANSWER to the question or implied question raised.

–It should assert an argument (you should be able to imagine someone disagreeing with your thesis)
–It should appear early in the paper and it should be clearly expressed (but it needn’t be a single sentence as students are sometimes taught)
–It should be specific.

Your introduction might have to be written AFTER you’ve already drafted some or most of the paper. (You might not know exactly what you’re going to say until you’ve said it.)

**DEALING WITH CRITICS**

One thing you might consider doing somewhere in your introductory material (the first page and a half or so), or even as part of setting up the problem, is providing a brief overview of relevant criticism.
-For instance, you might be talking about something that you believe has been overlooked in the criticism. (I know—hard to do with *Frankenstein*, but this might be true of the work you’ve chosen for your research project). But let’s say that your paper is about Elizabeth Lavenza in *Frankenstein*. You could start your essay by stating that critics of the novel have been mostly concerned with examining Victor and the creature and the relationship between the two of them. Then you might very briefly sum up the main points or topics of some of the best-known, most relevant articles. This could then lead into your point that the role Elizabeth plays in the novel has been overlooked and into your own specific thesis about how and why Shelley presents this character the way she does.

-Or it might be that you are building on arguments made by other critics. In this case, you’ll want to introduce the critics and their views, then make it clear to your audience what you are adding to the discussion. You don’t want your own argument to simply repeat an argument already made by another critic.

-Or perhaps you’re disagreeing with a particular critical view or even with a critical consensus. In that case, you’ll again want to sum up the relevant criticism that your essay is arguing against. For instance, perhaps many of the articles you read suggest that Victor Frankenstein is a bad parent and a selfish man who we are not supposed to feel pity for. But perhaps you want to argue that while Victor makes mistakes, he is still a noble and admirable figure who does the right thing in the end. It would make sense to briefly summarize two or three of the articles that make the claim that you intend to refute, then lead into your own thesis.

Some things to remember when incorporating outside critical views into your paper:

-Do not let the critics *subsume* or *dominate* your own argument. The main point of the essay is for you to offer your own interpretation of the work. The critics are included to show that you taking part in a conversation that already exists about the work—that you’re aware of what other critics have said and that you’re aware of how your own ideas fit into this ongoing conversation.

-When you cite a critic, it may be either because you agree or disagree with the critic or else the critic provided some kind of background information that is useful for your readers to know. You should make it clear to your reader why
you are using the critic. It should be clear to your reader as well whether you agree or disagree with the critic’s view.

- Be sure to always introduce critics; don’t simply drop a critical idea into your prose as if it was your own idea, except that it has quotes around it. Use a critic’s first and last name the first time you cite the critic. After that, last names alone are fine.

- NEVER allow your thesis (or even your most important, interesting points) to be made in quotes from critics. Your thesis must be your own. If your ideas are that similar to the ideas of a critic, you need to think more about the purpose of the paper, what you’re adding to the conversation.

Use MLA citation forms to cite both primary and secondary sources—internal citations and a works cited page at the end, not footnotes. Often, all you will need in the internal citation is a page number since you will already have introduced the critic in some kind of signal phrase. (i.e.: According to critic Ellen Moers, “birth is a hideous thing in *Frankenstein*, even before there is a monster” (323). This internal citation will then be keyed to the entry for Moers on your works cited page).

**Organizing**

Your essay should definitely have an overall plan of organization. A good, strong thesis often sets out what you need to explore and in what order. Try at least jotting down a preliminary outline before you begin writing so that you have a sense of where you’re going in your argument (of course, your direction might change as you discover more about your topic through the writing process, but you should be aware of a plan of some sort as you write). If you end up with the type of paper in which you could cut apart the paragraphs and re-arrange them with no appreciable difference made in your overall paper, something is wrong. A good essay will DEVELOP its argument—point building on point.

Here’s some advice on paragraph organization that comes from Jonathan Smith at the University of Michigan-Dearborn:

Each paragraph should make a single, main point. That point may be fairly complex, but it represents what the paragraph demonstrates and proves. The expression of that main point is usually made in a sentence called the topic sentence, which is to the paragraph what the thesis is to the paper. A paragraph that sticks to a single, main point is said to have unity. Disunified paragraphs shift topics--often multiple times.
Now, like the expression "thesis statement," "topic sentence" can be a bit misleading. Often, a topic sentence is more than one sentence (most commonly, a general topic sentence is followed by a more precise and specific one). Sometimes, a topic sentence is implied rather than stated directly--good writers are skillful at this. And a topic sentence can come anywhere in a paragraph.

But you'd be surprised how often student writers either fail to state or even imply a topic sentence, or "drift" their way through a paragraph, arriving at their real point only at the very end of the paragraph. This is inevitable in a draft, but it's a major weakness in a finished paper. That's because it's pretty frustrating for the reader, who is reading through the paragraph unsure of what she's supposed to be getting out of it, what point is being made, what she's supposed to be looking for. Since your goal is to convince the reader of the truth of your argument, such readerly uncertainty is something you want to avoid at all costs.

So, work at writing an explicit topic sentence for every paragraph and locating it near the beginning of the paragraph. In revision especially, ask yourself, "What is the point I want to make in this paragraph? What is it, exactly, I'm trying to say?" As you get better at this you'll find that you become more adept at communicating your main idea less directly but no less clearly, but when you're just starting out, the discipline of being explicit early in the paragraph will improve the clarity of your papers. I've never heard a professor complain about a student paper with topic sentences that were too clear.

Whether or not the opening sentence of a paragraph is the topic sentence, the first sentence or two of a paragraph needs to establish a transition from the previous paragraph. In other words, how is the main point of the new paragraph related to the main point of the paragraph that precedes it? Remember, you're leading the reader through an argument, so you want the reader to be clear about how the new paragraph is related. Often this is a matter simply of a word or a phrase in the first sentence--"however," "another," "this," "despite," "on the other hand," etc. If you're working at making that first sentence your topic sentence, then it should be easy to also work at making it a clear transition from the previous paragraph.

Most abrupt or sudden paragraph transitions in student writing are the result of using the chronology of the work's plot or structure as a transitional device: "In the second act, Hamlet decides to trap Claudius using the play-within-the-play." There are times when such a transition is appropriate, but generally it's a bad idea--for the simple reason that you're writing an argument, not a plot summary. While you may very well choose to move through the work you're discussing in a chronological fashion, it is still your argument that should drive the transitions: "Although Hamlet presents himself as an obedient son, he refuses to accept his father's ghost's claim that he was murdered by Claudius, instead determining to 'catch' the king."

**Handling Evidence**

Again, here's Jonathan Smith on using evidence in a paper about literature:

Arguments obviously require evidence to support them. What, though, counts as evidence in a paper about literature? Literary critics bring different kinds of evidence to support their
positions: biographical information about the author, historical information, evidence from the author's other writings (both literary and nonliterary), comments by other literary critics, and examples and quotations from the work itself. Different kinds of papers require different kinds of evidence, but all papers about literature require evidence from the text. The language of the work is the data, if you will, that, whatever other kinds of evidence you may offer, must be present. When we talk about paragraph development, what we really mean is this: is the main point of a paragraph spelled out clearly and thoroughly, and is it supported with good textual evidence?

How do you know when to use a quotation and what quotation to use? Well, it depends on your argument. Sometimes it's sufficient to paraphrase from the work, especially if the specific language of a passage doesn't add much to the general example. . . . In other words, choose to support those statements that are most centrally related to your argument, and then select quotations that do so most directly. Student writers frequently make bad decisions about quotations: they support points that aren't central to their argument, or they select quotations that don't support the point they claim to be supporting. . . .

And how many quotations and examples are required to prove a point? Again, it depends. A general claim about fathers and sons in Hamlet will require examples from several different father-son pairs. A claim that something is true throughout the play will require examples from different points in the play. In other words, you must examine your own claims critically, asking yourself, "How much and what kind of evidence do I need to provide to convince my reader that this point is true?" And you must develop a feel for which points are most crucial to the argument and which might be most surprising, for it is these that will require more evidence. Whereas a single example or quotation might suffice to establish a minor point, a central point is apt to require several.

Once you've selected a quotation to use, you then have to decide how much of it to use. Student writers often provide quotations that are too long--much of the language quoted is not directly related to the point being made, and as a result the language that is related gets lost. So look closely at your quotation. What part or parts of it are most essential, speak most directly to your point? Limit the quotation to just that part or parts, using your own prose to present information necessary for the reader to understand the quotation. Generally speaking, long quotations--those that must be indented and set off from the text--should be used sparingly.

When you're finally ready to incorporate a quotation into your paper, you have three responsibilities. First, you must be sure that the reader has adequate context for the quotation, that the reader knows where the quotation is coming from, who is speaking, what is happening at that point, etc. This is essential because you want the reader focused on what the quotation is saying and how it relates to your point. If the reader is trying to determine who is speaking and the context from which the quotation is taken, she won't be aware of the more specific details, which are the reason you're using the quotation in the first place. Second, you must fuse or integrate the quotation smoothly into the paper. That is, the entire sentence--your prose plus the quotation--must create a complete, grammatically and syntactically correct sentence. Third, and most crucially, you must explicate or explain the quotation. That is, you must make explicit what the quotation shows, how it supports or
illustrates your point. While this may be obvious to you, you cannot assume that it's obvious to your reader, and you don't want your reader guessing or groping. The need to explicate is especially great after a long quotation. So don't just drop a quotation on the reader and immediately dash off to the next point.

Providing adequate context for a quotation requires that you put yourself in the reader's shoes. Quotations should not be dropped like bombs on the unsuspecting reader: they need to be introduced. Except in very special situations, a quotation should never sit by itself as its own sentence. The reason for this is obvious: the reader hits the quotation marks and immediately wonders who is speaking, which means she's not paying attention to the content of the quotation. And introducing a quotation by telling the reader that it appears in Act 4 or in lines 56-58 or in chapter 7 isn't of much help: the key is the context, not chronology. The location of the quotation goes in the parenthetical reference that follows it, not in the body of the text. On the other hand, don't provide more context than the reader needs to understand the quotation and its relevance to your point--unnecessary context will simply distract the reader. Watch out for pronouns and words like "this" and "that" in the quotation--be sure the reader knows who or what is being referred to.

**CONCLUSION**
I would suggest trying to avoid the so-called “summary conclusion.” (“As we have seen, blah, blah, blah”). This will seem repetitive and probably won’t be necessary in a well-written essay. If you’ve been giving readers adequate guides throughout the paper (thesis, topic sentences, transitions, etc.), you shouldn’t need to simply sum up the points you’ve made—your reader should remember them.

But then that leaves the problem—what do you put in your conclusion? I’d suggest using something sometimes called the “climax conclusion.” In other words, conclude your essay by offering an interpretation of the end of the work or works you’re analyzing—in terms of how the end of the work relates to your thesis. So, if you’re writing a paper about the creature in *Frankenstein*, conclude by examining where Shelley leaves the creature at the end of the novel. Where do we last see him? What is he doing in that final scene and how does this affect your overall reading of the character? You should definitely refer back to the thesis at the end, but you can do so in a fairly brief way. If you use this type of conclusion, your paper will sound final, and you can let the author do part of the work for you!

**SOME NOTES ON STYLE**
To make your writing as lively as possible, your style should be clear, direct, and straightforward. Tangled, confusing sentences usually suggest tangled, confusing thoughts.

Here are some suggestions for improving style:
- Avoid passive voice when possible. (Rather than a wordy phrase like “It is demonstrated by Shelley that...,” use the active: “Shelley depicts...”)

- Use strong, action verbs rather than verb phrases or weak verbs (“get into an argument about” becomes “argue”; “take a look at” becomes “examine,” etc.). Weak verbs include forms of “to be” and “to have”

- Get the main idea up to the front of the sentence—ask yourself, “Who’s kicking who” (Who’s doing what to whom?) and feature that idea

- Vary your sentences. Student writers often believe that all sentences should be the same length and that they should all be long. Throw in a short sentence every now and then to add variety, rhythm to your prose style. On the other hand, if your sentences all seem too short and choppy, you probably need to work on combining sentences.

- Read your prose out loud. You can often intuitively hear grammatical and stylistic problems that you might overlook on the written page.

- Above all, put yourself in the place of your reader as you revise. Is it easy to identify your main, overall argument? Are your sentences clear? Have you provided adequate context for the arguments you make? Are your points logically connected to one another?