

The field of literature is rich with conversations about books and their authors, stories and characters, and great themes that return in different literary works. Writing a literature essay is your chance to participate in those conversations!

Remember that writing is a process. Often – especially if they are pressed for time – students think they can just sit down, say “Go!” and write an entire essay from start to finish. Not only is writing this way intimidating, but it also often results in a poor essay, because you don’t have the chance to organize your ideas. To write a well organized essay, it helps to break the assignment down into manageable chunks: brainstorming, completing an outline, writing a first draft, and revising.

Writing is like other jobs or skills: it takes practice. There are also many possible approaches. As you gain more experience writing, you will learn what works best for you. In the meantime, here are some basic steps to break down the assignment, and make sure you’re going through the necessary steps.

The Basic Steps

Get comfortable with the assignment

Read over the assignment. Make sure you understand what the assignment or question is asking of you. Choose a topic (if you are given a choice). In university essays, the instructor often provides a general topic or question, but it is up to you to choose how you will focus your essay.

Tips for choosing a topic:

If you are faced with several topics to choose from, how do you choose? What makes a good topic choice?

Go with one that:

- you have the most to say about
- you are the most interested in
- you can find more questions for than answers

Brainstorm ideas

Don't just launch into a draft of your essay once you have chosen your topic. It's important to start generating ideas. One of the most crucial steps is finding out what aspects of the topic interest you. You should also take a look at the text you'll be writing in order to generate ideas for a thesis and supporting examples.

Remember, though, you're not trying to pull ideas and support out of the air—you're trying to pull them out of the text. You want to go beyond the details your professor talked about in class, to come up with your own things to say, including your own supporting evidence.

Primary and Secondary Sources

When writing a literary essay, there are two types of sources you can use: primary and secondary. The primary source is the piece of literature you are writing about. For example, if you're asked to write an essay about the portrayal of women in *Jane Eyre*, then *Jane Eyre* is your primary source. Secondary sources are texts or materials that other people have already created about the primary text; some examples include books, articles in academic journals, documentary films, and websites.

Formulate a thesis

Once you have a list of ideas to write about, and evidence to support your ideas, you are ready to write your thesis. At this stage, your goal is to create a concise statement of your argument. As you write the essay, the evidence may cause you to change your original argument. That's okay; your essay will be stronger if you allow yourself to be flexible, rather than carving your thesis in stone when you start writing your outline or first draft.

However, the more focused you can make your thesis at this stage, the more focused your outline and first draft will be. There are some steps you can take to help you focus your thesis at this stage:

The “So What” Check

Once you have a preliminary thesis, it is important to decide whether it is a strong thesis that will support your essay. To do this, ask yourself, “So what?”

For example, if you are asked to write an essay about images in the book *Barnacle Love*, your first attempt at a thesis might look something like this:

Images of fish occur frequently.

You have a thesis, but does the thesis probe the topic deeply enough? The answer: probably not. To develop your thesis further, try asking, “So what?” In other words, “Why bother with the fish images? What purpose do they serve in the book? What are the wider implications?”

Brainstorm some ideas that could answer the “so what” question. Make sure you can support your “so what” with evidence in the text. Then, revise your thesis to include this new insight. For example, your revised thesis might be something like the following:

Images of fish occur frequently in *Barnacle Love*, representing the strength of Manuel’s ties to Portugal.

You can take the essay even further by examining what the image is doing in the book, and then extending that role to a discussion of a larger context. For example:

Images of fish occur in both subtle and obvious ways in *Barnacle Love*, suggesting the levels of nuance in Manuel’s attitude towards Portugal and the complexity possible in a person’s relationship with his homeland after emigrating.

An effective strategy is to start writing a draft of your essay with a thesis like one of the two above. By the end of the draft, you may have developed ideas about the wider implications. You can then incorporate these ideas into your thesis and revise your essay based on your new, strong thesis.

Create an outline

An outline is your chance to organize the ideas you've already brainstormed and your supporting research into a paper that proves your thesis. However, remember that writing is a process, and your essay may change as you move from outline to first draft through subsequent drafts. The outline isn't meant to be something you have to follow word for word: it's more like a map of a possible route you can take. However, you may find better routes once you're actually on your way.

Double-check your thesis

Once you have a complete outline, look back at your thesis and ask yourself if your paper still supports the argument. If the thesis and outline don't match up, this is a good opportunity for you to reassess your thesis and outline and revise either if necessary.

Remember, don't be afraid to:

- create a first draft
- revise your thesis
- revise your essay, focusing on aspects such as organization and structure, development of ideas, connections and logic
- proofread your essay for grammar, spelling and punctuation