**Writing a literary essay**

The literary insight essay invites you to express your own feelings and ideas about a literary work (a short story, a novel, or a play). In this type of essay you are usually not asked to do research (especially not just to copy statements from professional critics about the story you are analysing). Nor is this a book report, so you do not want to summarise the plot; assume that the reader has already read the story. Instead, the reader is interested in your interpretation of the story. What makes such an essay valuable is your perceptions (as different from anybody else’s) about this particular piece of literature.

You may be interested in writing about some feature of the story: its symbolism, imagery (a visual metaphor important to the theme of the story, ex. The image of dying flowers in D.H. Lawrence’s "The Odour of Chrysanthemums"), irony, setting, point-of-view, motifs (recurrent elements, ex. Darkness recurs in "The Odour of Chrysanthemums" to create suspense and to signify death and alienation), important contrasts or similarities in the story, or characterisation. Whatever you write about, your purpose is not to make your readers like or dislike the story, but to help them see things that they may not have seen before.

Start by *freewriting* about the question you have been asked or the topic you are considering: write your first impressions quickly to get your ideas on paper. Among other things, you should focus on the details – the symbols, the connotations of key words, the characters’ gestures, and perhaps a few key sentences that puzzle or surprise you. This will necessitate reading and re-reading the story. Close reading leads to close analysis. Make extensive notes, digging deeply into the story. After a while, you will find some central interest or idea emerging out of your notes. This idea will become the crux of your paper, your thesis, the central idea that you want to convey to the reader.

**The Introductory Paragraph**

Your first paragraph should attract the reader’s attention: it should be bold, thought-provoking, and clearly focused. Here is an example of an introductory paragraph from an essay on Ernest Hemingway’s story "Hills Like White Elephants":

**Ernest Hemingway’s opening paragraph in "Hills Like White Elephants" immediately projects his readers into a landscape that is barren and uncomfortable. It is a scene so simple, yet so vivid, that the reader physically senses the burning of the sun and the stillness of the day, interrupted only by the pesky flies and the woman from the bar. It is a scene symbolic of the lives, the future, and the relentless indecision that confronts the American and the girl, Jig.**

It is advisable somewhere in the introductory paragraph to state the theme of the story and the thesis of your essay. A story’s theme is the message which you feel the author is conveying (there may be more than one theme per story). The theme is expressed as a general statement about life or human nature. You may express it in one or more sentences. Do not confuse it with a plot summary. In the following example the writer opens up an essay on the motif/symbol of darkness in "The Odour of Chrysanthemums" by stating the theme of the story:

**It is sometimes difficult for two people who live together to get along well. They can take each other for granted. Or worse, they can be alienated to the point where they don’t understand each other clearly and objectively. The heated emotions that occur in a close relationship – anger, jealousy, possessiveness – prevent an objective understanding.**

After stating the theme, you should relate it to your thesis. The thesis is the claim or central idea around which you build your essay. Everything in your essay should relate to your thesis. Continuing on in the same introductory paragraph, the writer works his way towards the thesis:

**It is only with divorce or with the death of one of them that an individual no longer reacts against his mate and can cut through the darkness of misunderstanding to understand his mate clearly. In D.H. Lawrence’s story "The Odour of Chrysanthemums" the inability to understand, to clearly see another’s point-of-view, is represented by the motif of darkness.**

The last sentence is called the thesis or thesis statement and it usually comes at the very end of the introductory paragraph. It is the punch-line that paves the way for the rest of the essay. The introductory paragraph is therefore sometimes funnel-shaped., beginning generally and narrowing to a single intention.

Here is another example of an introductory paragraph:

**Guy de Maupassant’s "Love" scarcely seems a story at all, at least in the conventional sense: two cousins on a hunting trip; minimal description of the characters; a bit of dialogue; and two dead ducks, matter-of-factly bagged by the narrator and taken back to Paris. But great meaning rides on the broad backs of descriptive passages, of settings so detailed, so intricate and passionately mobile, that the reader fairly races over the action-packed terrain of the human heart. The French countryside, the hunter’s lodge, and the frozen marsh reveal the cursed conflict between primitive and civilised man, between warmly palpitating and frozen hearts.**

Don’t be afraid of crawling out on a limb and taking chances with a provocative thesis. A stimulating interpretation always interests the reader. Just make sure you can back it up with enough evidence from the story.

Avoid the kind of introductory paragraph that beats around the bush because you don’t have much to say:

**James Joyce is a famous writer of the early 20th century. His stories are full of symbolism. His symbols are full of meaning, and his images are very vivid. Whenever he writes about men and woman, he writes about them in a poetic style. That is why his stories are interesting to read.**

Beating around the bush wastes the reader’s time. After reading the introductory paragraph, the reader should know definitely where the paper is going and be interested in reading the rest of the essay.

**The Middle Paragraphs**

Your middle paragraphs will explain your thesis (your central idea) and give evidence from the story to support it. Refer to incidents from the story that support your thesis specifically. You may also quote sentences that are directly relevant to your thesis, and refer to keywords from the story whose connotations support your thesis. Just as a lawyer in court must offer enough evidence to defend his client, so you must offer enough evidence from the story to support your thesis. But don’t just quote from the story. Explain how you interpret the quotation, which words seem significant and what they suggest about the point you are making. When you quote something directly, remember to use quotation marks around it. (You may want to omit some material within a quotation that is unnecessary to your point; in this case, use ellipsis – three spaced periods -- to indicate omitted material.)

The best way to begin each middle paragraph is with a topic sentence that summarises the paragraph and shows how that paragraph relates to your thesis. Do not begin a paragraph with a fact about the plot. It will only lead you to another fact about the plot and you’ll find you’ll be summarising the plot instead of interpreting the story. Also, do not begin a paragraph or any sentence within the paragraph with a direct quotation from the story. Instead, work the quotation into your own prose, in a smooth, grammatically correct way:

**It is Karl who calls the narrator outside to see "the enormous diamond with a heart of fire . . . suddenly planted there in the midst of the frozen water of the marsh."**

Your middle paragraphs should read coherently with each sentence flowing smoothly into the next sentence, and each paragraph making a smooth transition into the succeeding paragraph. At times it will seem as if you are re-telling the story in the context of your theory of how the story works. You do not need not follow the sequence of events in the story. Your thesis may dictate a different order. Remember to keep the reader on track of your thesis all the way through the paper, and not to lose him through unnecessary digressions.

Here is a sample middle paragraph from the essay on the motif of chrysanthemums in "The Odour of Chrysanthemums":

**Mrs. Bates’ ambivalent feelings towards her husband are reflected in her ambivalence towards the chrysanthemums. She is both disgusted by her husband and nostalgic for the good times they used to have. When John, her son, "tears at the ragged wisps of chrysanthemums and dropped the petals," she feels sorry for the flowers – and for herself – and taking a twig of flowers she "held them against her face" in fond memory of the way the marriage used to be. And the, "instead of laying the flower aside, she pushed it in her apron-band." She wears the flower as an emblem to their now defunct relationship just as some people wear arm-bands at a funeral. Yet when the daughter is excited about the mother keeping a flower in her apron, Mrs. Bates is sarcastic, saying, "Goodness me! One would think the house is afire" and she "irritably . . . took the flowers out from her apron-band."**

**The Concluding Paragraph**

You may not need a concluding paragraph, especially in a short essay. If you do add a concluding paragraph, it should sum up your thesis without sounding redundant. It may even put the issue into a wider perspective or ask a challenging question.

Here is a sample concluding paragraph from the essay on de Maupassant’s "Love":

**The descriptive passages show the narrator’s true heart, the icy heart of an articulate, highly intelligent being who is, in the end, a dispassionate Parisian, "chilled to the very marrow." The paradox, breaking the cold hearts of our civilized, rational, sophisticated natures, is, of course, that the primitivism of the birds is the highest form of sensitivity, delicacy, refinement. And the "fearsome" country of the human heart conceals the "unknown and dangerous secret," the inability of civilized humans to love passionately, or even, perhaps, to love at all.**

**Perceptive Writing**

Being a perceptive writer means partly being a "psychoanalyst." You should plumb the minds of the characters to understand the motives for their actions, gestures, and words.

Being perceptive also means drawing as much meaning as you can from symbols. When analysing symbols, explain them accurately and fully. If you say, for example, that a swan in a certain story is a symbol of Christ, explain what characteristics it has that make it so.

Be perceptive too in analysing the connotations of key words from the story that are relevant to your thesis. Look at the following where the writer discusses the word "imperious" as it relates to the story "The Odour of Chrysanthemums":

**Near the opening of the story, Mrs. Bates is described as "imperious." "Imperious" means domineering and arrogant, and it portrays Mrs. Bates as a woman in full command. Indeed, as she stands looking at the miners wending their way home, she seems like an army commander surveying her troops. Her "definite" eyebrows and hair "parted exactly" reinforce the image of her as a non-nonsense commander. The way she talks sternly to her son and daughter also conveys her imperious attitude. It is only at the end of the story, when she is humbled by her husband’s death, that she is "countermanded" (no longer "in command" and her imperious attitude is replaced by humility and submissiveness.**

Although your teacher may have asked you to write about only one story, you may wish to point out subtle similarities and contrasts between it and other stories by the same author. This will show that you are an astute reader.

Be speculative. You may suggest two or three possible meanings for a symbol, or a character’s gesture or statement. You need not restrict yourself to one meaning.

Here are some questions to ask yourself as you read through a story. Use these questions to stimulate your writing:

* What is the story’s theme(s)?
* How does the setting relate to the theme? Why, for example, is the story set in winder instead of summer; or night instead of day?
* Describe the influence of setting on the characters. How does it put pressure on them to react or prevent them from reacting?
* Does the setting symbolise the characters’ moods or personalities?
* Why do the characters act as they do? Is their dress significant? Their names?
* What change does the main character go through in the story?
* Is he a different person at the end than he was at the beginning?
* Does he awaken from an illusion at the end? Or is he stuck?
* What motifs (recurring elements) occur in the story and how do they develop the theme or express the characters’ personalities? I.e. why are there recurring images of circles –suns, moons, cycles, droplets of water?
* How does the author’s writing style reflect the theme and characters? I.e. the short, blunt sentenc3es of Hemingway reflect characters who have stripped life to its bare essentials.
* What type of genre is it: realism? Naturalism? Romanticism? Gothic?
* What is the social and historical context of the story? At the time the story was written, who had the money, power, privilege, and status?
* What conflicts or contrasts occur in the story?
* How do the symbols relate to the theme? I.e. Is the rose in the story a symbol of passion? The circle a symbol of perfection?