

“An essay is good

1. If most readers could not convincingly answer the question (your topic asks) after reading the work once (i.e., the topic should be thought-provoking).
2. if your topic is meaningful (worth considering—i.e., will the answer, your essay, enhance your readers’ understanding of the work?).
3. if the topic is focused narrowly enough to develop your answer in depth within your space limitations. For example, “Comedy in *Romeo and Juliet*” is too broad for a typical essay (900-3000 words), whereas “The Nurse as a Comic figure” would be more specific and manageable.” --“Writing about Literature,” the Writing and Communication Center.

Close reading is the analysis of passages from in terms of diction, figurative language (metaphors, similes, names, etc.), tone, characterization, strategies of narration, plot, topics, “place” of the passage in the text as a whole, and theme. Like any kind of analysis, closer reading examines the ways that the parts of a text (in this case, parts of a passage) work separately and together to contribute to the text as a whole. Note that analysis differs from summary in answering the “why?” and “so what?” question, while summary answers questions about “who?” “what?” “when?” and “where?” In examining passages, aim to explain the *significance* of a passage, not just the meaning. For example, “Bingley says that he did not know that Elizabeth was a ‘studier of character’ (38),” remains plot summary: it tells *what* happened, stating *who* said *what*. In contrast, the following sentence and paragraph analyze the statement by explaining its significance in the novel as a whole:

When Bingley calls Elizabeth a “studier of character” (58), he names one of the major activities and concerns in the novel: evaluating people. While the book opens with an evaluation of Mr. Bingley in terms of his marital status, sex, and money, Elizabeth focuses on deeper qualities. When Bingley says that it “must be an amusing study,” his language emphasizes that Elizabeth needs to entertain herself in a small community with somewhat limited diversions. The word, “study,” however, underscores the importance that both Elizabeth and the narrator give to this activity. In fact, the novel’s title includes two character traits that play important roles in the story, so Bingley’s quick response holds much more significance than first appears.

The topic of “intricate characters” provides an opening for not only Bingley and Elizabeth but also Darcy and Mrs. Bennet to reveal more about their characters. . . .

TIPS: Write this (and any) paper in stages: pre-writing, drafting, revising, and editing.

Pre-writing: First, sit with your text, notes, and ideas about the book or story.

Consider the parts of the text that you like, dislike, or have questions about. Topics that catch your imagination will prove more interesting to you and probably to readers. (If you don’t get excited about the paper, why should anyone else?)

Choose a passage that enables you to explain and explore what you like or dislike. Imagine explaining your interest in the passage to a friend; try outlining, talking, or ordering index cards. If you choose two or more passages, write about them

individually and collectively.

Formulate a tentative organizing idea or (hypo)thesis about the passage's significance.

Remember to *adjust* the thesis to fit the data, or choose passages that fit the thesis. Almost inevitably, you will need to tailor the thesis beyond its initial form; do so. The point of examining the data is to discover what it reveals; *use* the revelations. The original elements and the fruitfulness of your thesis & paper give them value, so a thesis and paper that discover connections, cogently explain the author's choices, find significance in techniques, or reveal hidden patterns have value.

Drafting: Write in any way that accumulates ideas to convey your thoughts to readers: *Freewrite* in phrases or sentences and fix later; *write in sentences, outline*; *organize notecards* or other pieces of evidence; *use an idea "tree"* or balloon, etc. Consult friends or a person in class about a paper's clarity.

Writing the introduction: Write the clearest introduction and thesis statement (main idea) that you can, but realize that the *best introduction usually gets written after you write the end* of at least one draft. That way, you've realized what you want to say.

Later, steal a clear statement of your main idea from the conclusion; state that idea as the thesis in the introduction to *catch and focus readers' attention* and begin the argument (argue a controversial, un-obvious idea).

Try to *forecast, or signal, the paper's general organization*. Example:

"Bingley's offhand comment to Elizabeth reveals a similarity between her and Darcy and identifies a topic to which all the characters respond in important ways. Further, it refers to one of the narrator's concerns:"

This suggests a general organization that moves from A (E and D's similar trait of studying character) to B (other characters' interest in character), and finally to C (use of point of view, theme, and other narratorial/narrative techniques).

"Warm-up" introductions: Many writers begin with a "throat-clearing" or universal statement, which is fine if it helps you begin; later, after your conclusion arrives at your main idea, cut the "warm-up." Readers (and papers) benefit more from an immediate focus on the paper topic (here, the significance of the passage/s). Instead of stating, "Judging character should concern anyone considering marriage," begin with a comment about the novel or short story and locate the passage within that context. Do you love to make or refer to universal claims?-- limit yourself to one or two general statements instead of a paragraph of them.

In the conclusion, you may feel tempted to use generalization; remember that fully exploring the passages, themes, and techniques in the texts will be more convincing.

Revising and editing will receive attention in future handouts. For now, use the skills you have learned to make your introduction and conclusion as clear, specific, and forceful as you can. For example, revise a phrase like, “for the reasons above, the passage in *Pride and Prejudice* contributes significantly to revealing Mr. Bennet’s character” by naming or at least characterizing “the reasons above.”

***Resist any impulse to make general claims beyond the novel.