

Undergraduate Guide to Studying Literature

Introduction

To Students

What you need to know first of all is in the syllabus or course outline you will receive at your first class. What is in this Web Guide is meant to supplement the handouts you receive from your instructor and help you with your English Studies. Students in the Film and Theatre Programs may also find this information helpful with a few modifications.

This Guide represents in general the practice in most sections of English literature classes, but each instructor sets the specific requirements for his or her section according to the particular needs of that section, so that your instructor's requirements take precedence over what is in this Guide. If you have any questions about what is required for your class, ask your instructor.

If you have any questions or suggestions about this Web Guide, please email them to the English Department at english@umanitoba.ca.

To the Instructors

The purpose of this Guide is to provide basic help to students beginning their undergraduate study of literature in the English Department. You may copy any of the information here and modify it to suit your needs and your students' needs.

The material in this Web Guide was compiled by Professor Terry Ogden in consultation with members of the English Department. Any corrections or improvements that you would like to recommend in this handbook should be sent to the First Year Committee or to the Undergraduate Course and Programs Committee, in care of the Department of English. The English Department can be reached by email at english@umanitoba.ca.

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1. How Well Do You Understand What You Have Read?

Questions to Ask of a Literary Text

Question what you are reading so that you can better understand what it is:

1. **Who is writing or speaking?** Is the author writing in his or her own person, or playing a particular role, or presenting us with one or more characters who are writing or represented as speaking? Is the narrative perspective singular or plural? Does the point of view shift? If so, where does this happen, and why?
2. **What is the writer writing about?** Why? What is the purpose of the author or the character(s) in writing or speaking?
3. **To whom is the writer writing, or the speaker speaking?** Directly to you, or are you overhearing the author speaking to someone else? How is the audience defined or indicated by the text?
4. **What action is involved, explicitly or implicitly?** Is there a sequence of events—a beginning, middle, and end? What causes the action to progress? How are the different stages or events related to one another? Is the order of events as they happened the same as the order of events as they are told? Does the beginning anticipate the ending? Does the ending alter, expand, or change the outlook of its beginning?
5. **When does the action take place?** How long does it take? How is time reflected? How is the time of composition related to the time being represented?
6. **Where does the action take place?** How well defined is the setting? If there is more than one setting, how are the different settings related?
7. **What kind of language is used?** Is there anything distinctive about the diction or forms of sentences? Do the words come from a particular area, trade, or profession? Is the language formal, informal, or slang? What kind of figurative language is used (such as metaphor or symbol) and with what effect? Is the syntax simple or complex? balanced or rambling? How is the writing organized?
8. **In what literary form does the text appear?**—narrative, dramatic, or lyric (or some combination of these)? Can you readily identify the genre or category in which the piece falls, such as tragedy or comedy, epic or pastoral, sonnet or ballad, romance or satire? Do the conventions of that genre help you better understand the piece?
9. **Is the sound of the language an effective feature?** While this question applies especially to poetry, prose also makes use of the rhythms of language and the balance of syntax. If the text appears as poetry, what meter, line length, rhyme, and stanzaic form are used? With what effect? Does the sound suggest a pace of rapid or slow?
10. **Can you characterize the tone of the writing?** For example is it serious or flippant, sad or happy, confident or questioning, naive or ironic? How is that tone established?

11. **How can you relate these different questions to one another?** For example, how does the tone of speaking tell you something about the character of the speaker? How does the kind of language suit the action? Which of the various features are more prominent? most effective? most relevant to the meaning of the piece?
12. **What impression are you left with?** What elements in the text helped create that impression?

All these questions, you can see, derive from the six basic question words (interrogative pronouns):

What is it? (Genre) What happens? (Action or narrative form) What does it mean? (Interpretation)

Who is writing? (Author or Narrator) or speaking? (Character) To whom? (Audience)

Where and **when** does it take place? (Setting, Atmosphere)

Why does the author write? (Purpose) Why does the character do what he or she does? (Motivation)

How is the work constructed? (Organization, Style)

Expand these questions and adjust them to fit the text and topic that you are examining. Some of the questions you will have already answered automatically in the course of reading—they seem too obvious, but sometimes what seems obvious may have layers of complexity that are worth exploring. Some of the questions will seem irrelevant, unnecessary to consider because they are outside the purpose of the literary work. And other questions will have no answers because the text does not present sufficient information. In that case, is the question irrelevant, or does it remain consequential in the context of the work? Does the text itself raise questions? Are there inconsistencies, irregularities, unusual features that call attention to themselves, or contradictions, resolvable or not? How do you account for these features?

Determine which questions are important for your understanding of the text, and then reread it to examine it more carefully and see how well you can answer your questions. When you think a question is important but you cannot find an answer, ask it in class discussion. The questions you ask will also help you prepare for writing an essay.

The questions presented here are directed only toward the literary text itself to produce what is usually referred to as a close reading. Going beyond the text expands the possibilities of study in important ways—looking behind, beside, or in front of the text. Behind the text—where it came from—involves the author and the historical context, the culture and ideology out of which the text arose. How are they evident in the work? Looking beside the text engages in comparisons with other works—by the same author, by contemporary authors, works in the same genre, etc. And in front of the text is the reader: how is the work constructed so as to have a particular effect upon you?

Understanding a work of literature is always a relative matter: you understand it in relation to something else. How well you understand it is a matter of how far you pursue questions such as the ones given here.

2. Keeping a Reading Journal

Writing down your reaction to what you have read is a good way to sharpen your reading ability, develop your analytic skills, and keep track of your study. After completing your reading--or occasionally in the middle of your reading--write down your response. It may be just a few words, or it may be longer, depending on how fully you want to develop your response. Use whatever form of writing suits your fancy and fits the occasion--a sentence or paragraph, a list, an outline, a dialogue with the author, a poem, etc. Date your entries: you will see that your response depends in part on when you have written it down. You may find it most convenient to keep your journal on loose-leaf sheets so that you can add or subtract pages.

What to Write?

Consider writing about the reading assignment in any of the following ways, according to what has occurred to you either while you were reading or afterwards when you have been thinking about your reading or discussing it:

- How does the reading relate to something you have done or seen or read elsewhere?
- Talk back to the author or the character: compliment or criticize him or her; argue with the ideas or viewpoint in the text, or support them from your own experience or other reading.
- What effect does the text have, and how does it achieve that effect? What is your personal response to the reading, and what exactly in the text accounts for that response? Is it funny? moving? exciting? preposterous? profound? or what? Define the effect as fully as you can, and then determine what causes that effect. Is it the kind of language, the selection of detail, the tone, the style, the form, or what?
- Identify a literary element or rhetorical device (such as a metaphor, a symbol, an image, the meter, a syntactical construction, the diction, irony, or point of view) and explain how it works or what makes it effective.
- Isolate one or two details and examine their importance to the larger context.
- Identify a problem and try to solve it.
- Ask a question (such as one of the questions in the previous section) and answer it, or explore the possibilities of answering it.
- Take up an idea discussed in class that you want to amplify or argue against.
- Write about some observation or question that you wanted to raise in class.
- Compare one story (or poem or play or character or situation or style) with another.
- Identify a controversial issue; argue for one side and then argue for the other, as in a debate.
- Imitate or parody a passage.

Your reading journal need not be polished. It should show your thoughtful attention to the reading. You may find it interesting and helpful to exchange your journal with a classmate to compare comments. In some classes reading journals may count as part of class participation.

Why Write in Your Reading Journal?

To articulate your response. Writing out your response will make you aware of otherwise unrecognized assumptions and possible inconsistencies. It will help you see more clearly what is going on in the text.

To confirm your response. You probably think you know how you feel about your reading, but putting it in writing forces you to come to terms with what you think and feel; that is, to find the best words to express your response. In doing so, you will examine both your response and the text more carefully.

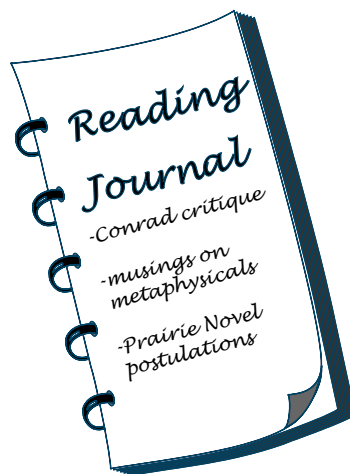
To develop your ideas about what you have read. Stories and poems generate new ways of looking at things, at people, and at issues.

To work out a problem. As in working out a mathematical problem, the easy ones you can do in your head, but the difficult ones need to be written down so that you can work through them step by step.

To prepare for class discussion, to practice for writing essays, and to have a record of your reading to review for the final examination.

In other words, to extend and develop your ability to read.

Your reason for writing will determine how well you write. Figure out for yourself as you go along exactly what you want to accomplish in your writing. Determine your own purpose; set your own goal. Use your reading journal in whatever way you find most interesting, helpful, and enjoyable, as long as it reflects your attention to the reading.



3. Critical Terms for Discussing Literature

- 1) Most of the terms we use in discussing literature are also a part of our common vocabulary: people talk about the TRAGEDY of 9/11, the IRONY of the Peter Principle, or the maple leaf as a SYMBOL of Canada. The same terms when applied to literary works usually carry the same general meaning but often also a more specialized and precise meaning. The dictionary definition of a term is usually a good starting point. You can find fuller definitions in literary handbooks (such as those listed at the end of this section), and many books have been written to examine the ramifications of each of these concepts, but for your study, the importance of these terms lies in the way they appear in the works you are reading—for example, the TRAGEDY of Willie Loman in *Death of a Salesman*, the IRONY of Elizabeth’s friendship with Mr. Wickham in *Pride and Prejudice*, the albatross as a SYMBOL of the burden of guilt in “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner,” and so on. You should have in mind a basic definition of the following terms, and then explore how they take on fuller meaning as you see them illustrated and developed in your reading.

The terms discussed below are listed here alphabetically so that you can click on them to go directly to their definition, but be aware of the way in which a term is often defined in relation to other terms in the same category, discussed in the preceding or following paragraphs, or discussed in more than one paragraph, as indicated by the paragraph numbers following each term.

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- 2) LITERATURE may include everything that is written--literally, everything that appears in letters, from the Bible to graffiti--but in general usage the term has been limited to writings in a specific field (as scientific literature). When not specified, the field is usually understood as imaginative and creative writing, or more narrowly, the best of such writing. What is "best" will of course vary according to who makes the judgment. *De gustibus non disputandum*, as the Romans recognized: taste is not to be disputed--we each have our own preferences. Nevertheless people have continued to argue for what they think is best in literature because they feel that, although a story may be fictitious, the values it contains are important, as is the way in which it is presented. Such arguing can become tedious and futile when it bogs down in prejudice and personal opinion, but it leads to fuller understanding when it is based on accurate observation of the literature, careful examination of how the language works, and sound logical explanation, as is the purpose of an English literature class. How the language works can often be understood in terms of the conventional forms and techniques of literature, as outlined in what follows.
- 3) Literature is generally divided into three kinds: NARRATIVE, DRAMATIC, and LYRIC. You may think of these categories in more common terms as stories, plays, and poems: a work of narrative literature tells a story, a drama acts out a story, and a lyric expresses an emotion. These general divisions often overlap, and many works of literature combine two or all three of these kinds, but the three kinds have formal differences that distinguish each one from the other two. Narrative literature has a narrator or story-teller intervening between us (the audience) and the story, and that intervention may affect the way we understand the story. Drama and lyric, on the other hand, are immediate: in drama we see the characters directly acting out the events rather than listen to someone else telling us about them; in lyric we hear or overhear the poet directly, usually speaking about personal feelings. Lyric is therefore usually subjective; in drama each character's subjective position is pitted against the others' subjective positions, leaving us with a sense of an objective presentation.
- 4) Narrative can vary from objective to subjective, depending on how much the narrator's own feelings enter into the story, and how much his or her point of view shapes the story. POINT OF VIEW has come to mean opinion, but for literary analysis, take the term literally: it is the point or place (geographic, temporal, emotional, etc.) from which the narrator or other character views things--the point that determines what the character sees and how the character sees it (which in turn gives rise to the character's opinions on what is viewed). POINT OF VIEW is also called NARRATIVE PERSPECTIVE. Some stories are told in FIRST PERSON, in which the narrator, the "I," tells a story in which he or she is involved. In other stories the narrator remains anonymous and tells the story in THIRD PERSON so that no "I" appears, just "he" and "she," the characters of the story. When the narrator tells a story from an OMNISCIENT point of view, the narrator is able to get into the minds of all of the characters. However, if the point of view is LIMITED, we know only what the narrator or one of the characters thinks, feels, sees, and understands
- 5) Narrative usually relates a story that has already happened, so it is in the past tense. Lyric usually expresses the poet's present emotion, or one that recurs, so it is in the present tense. If it is a past emotion, it will be rekindled and made present. Drama presents a story that may have been completed some time in the past but which is acted out as though it were happening right now on the stage in front of us, so it is also basically in the present tense.
- 6) Narrative and drama have a plot, a sequence of events rising to a climax and ending in some kind of resolution. Lyric, by contrast, generally has a single event, the expression of emotion which is the poem itself. A lyric poem may well rise to a climax and end with a resolution, but it will be not a sequence of events but an evolution of the emotion as the poem expresses it.
- 7) These three kinds of literature--narrative, dramatic, and lyric--are sometimes referred to as the three genres of literature; more accurately they are the three presentational modes. T. S. Eliot called them the three voices of literature. You may think of them as three different ways of shaping human experience. They come from

fundamental human impulses that express themselves in art, religion, history, and psychology: telling stories of where we come from, celebrating our joys and sorrows in song, and acting out significant events over again. In literature these three kinds of expression attain a highly refined form.

- 8) The term **GENRE** is more properly reserved for the categories within each one of these kinds of literature. **NARRATIVE**, for example, includes the genres of **NOVEL** (such as *The Handmaid's Tale*) and **SHORT STORY** ("The Snows of Kilimanjaro"). Each of these tells a story, developing a plot through the actions of its characters, but the way in which each genre tells its story differs in form, technique, and purpose. The brevity of the short story allows an intensity of design and effect that cannot be sustained in other longer forms, whereas the length of the novel allows a fuller development of character and a more complex plot.
- 9) The principal genres of classical **DRAMA** are **TRAGEDY** and **COMEDY**, distinguished most simply, as in common usage, by the outcome, whether sad or happy, but more significantly by the conventions that develop the profundity of individual suffering in tragedy, and the celebration of the human community in comedy.
- 10) **LYRIC** as a general category characterizes all poetry; more specifically it refers to the short simple verses in which the speaker expresses a personal emotion. Lyric verse is so called because in ancient Greece poetry was accompanied by the lyre. The name continues to be appropriate because lyric verse retains the features of song: the sound of the language--particularly in its use of rhythm and rhyme--corresponds to the sounding features of music. We need to hear poetry to comprehend its full effect, preferably by reading it aloud, and when reading silently, by hearing it with our inner ear--as a singer can read a musical score silently and hear its melody and harmony.
- 11) Its **METRICAL** form usually distinguishes poetry most clearly from prose: the number of syllables in each line is measured (usually eight or ten syllables), and the accents alternate in a regular pattern. (Earlier narrative and drama were also written in metrical form, for example Shakespeare's plays, but we usually refer to these works as plays rather than as poems because their dramatic features are more important than their poetic features in accounting for their literary form.) Much poetry in the past century has dispensed with regular meter, yet it continues to employ rhythm and other sound effects to achieve its meaning.
- 12) **SCANSION** is the exercise of determining the metrical pattern of a poem. This appears difficult to some people because we learn to ignore the sound of language and attend only to its meaning, to read silently without moving our lips, to speed-read by taking in a whole phrase at a glance rather than hearing individual syllables. Reading poetry is slow reading, being aware of all the dimensions of language. If you do not hear the rhythmical pattern of accents, you can figure it out by paying closer attention to the accent of words. Meter depends upon the normal pronunciation of words, so you can start identifying the stressed and unstressed syllables in words of more than one syllable. (If you cannot hear where the accent falls, look up the accentuation in a dictionary.) The main parts of speech--nouns and verbs--are usually accented, though pronouns, helping verbs, and forms of the verb "to be" are usually unaccented. The minor parts of speech--articles ("a," "an," "the"), conjunctions, and prepositions--are usually unaccented. Modifiers--adjectives and adverbs--vary according to the relative stress or lack of stress preceding and following, and according to their importance to the meaning of the sentence. Accent or stress in a sentence is highly complex: in speech we accent a syllable by speaking it louder, by prolonging its duration, by giving it a higher pitch, or by some combination of these features. In scansion we reduce this complexity to a simple binary system in which we consider each syllable as either accented or unaccented. That establishes the fundamental pattern that predominates in the poem. If every pattern were completely regular, the poem would have a sing-song effect, as in "Mary had a little lamb." Usually a poet varies the meter, sometimes for emphasis, sometimes to affect the flow of a phrase, and sometimes simply to avoid monotony. Skillful control of meter may convey the sense of the lines moving quickly or slowly, lively or sedately, gayly or somberly.

- 13) The names for the different metrical feet, lines, and stanzaic forms are useful for recognizing some of the major conventions in English poetry. The unit that normally contains one accented syllable and one or two unaccented syllables is called a FOOT. The most common foot, the IAMB, consists of two syllables with the accent on the second syllable, as “ă-grée.” The other feet, in order of their frequency in English verse, are as follows: the TROCHEE, an accented syllable followed by an unaccented one (the reverse of the iamb), as

Már-ŷ / hád ă / lít-tlě / íamb

ANAPEST, two unaccented syllables followed by an accented one, as

'Twas thě night / bě-fore Chríst- / mās and ál / through thě hóuse;

and DACTYL, the reverse of the anapest, as

This ĩs thě / for-est pří-/ mé-vál

Truncating (that is, shortening) the final foot is common in trochaic and dactylic verse, allowing the line to end with an accent, as in the trochaic line above. Occasionally you will encounter an irregular foot, such as a SPONDEE, two accented syllables, for emphasis, or a PYRRHIC foot, two unaccented syllables. The names are Greek because the Greeks devised the system of metrics we still use, though their meters were based on long and short vowel patterns. Coleridge shows how these different feet embody different kinds of movement in lines he wrote for his son:

Tróchěe trips fróm lóng tǒ shórt;
 From long to long in solemn sort
 Slów spóndée stáks; stróng fót! yet ill able
 Évēr tǒ cǒme ūp wĭth Dáctyl trĭsŷlláblě.
 ĭambĭcs márch fróm shórt tǒ lóng;
 Wĭth ă léap ănd ă bǒund thě swĭft Ánăpests thróng.

As you progress through these lines, consider how the sound and pace change to correspond to what the poet is saying about each of the different poetic feet.

- 14) Line length is usually four or five metrical feet, called respectively TETRAMETER and PENTAMETER. Tetrameter is more common in simple lyrics, such as nursery rhymes and songs. Pentameter is the most frequently used line length in English poetry: it seems to suit the phrasing and rhythm of the English language. (It also suits scanning: you can tap out the five beats with your five fingers.) Unrhymed iambic pentameter, called blank verse, has been used in some of the greatest of English poetry, such as Shakespeare's dramas, Milton's *Paradise Lost*, and Wordsworth's *Prelude*.

- 15) Various feet and line lengths are often combined to form the larger pattern of the stanza. A number of stanza forms have become conventional. Among the most common of these is the BALLAD STANZA: four lines that alternate from iambic tetrameter to iambic trimeter (three metrical feet), rhyming on the second and fourth lines (and sometimes on the first and third lines as well):

The boy stood on the burning deck,
 Whence all but he had fled;
 The flame that lit the battle's wreck
 Shone round him o'er the dead.

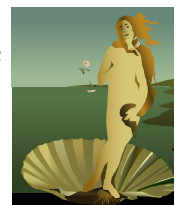
- 16) The other feature besides meter that distinguishes most traditional poetry is RHYME: the last accented syllable of a line repeats the sound of another line-ending, except that the initial consonant differs. More broadly, the principle of rhyme includes any repetition of sound: ALLITERATION, or the repetition of initial sounds of syllables; ASSONANCE, or the repetition of vowel sounds; and CONSONANCE, or the repetition of consonant sounds. An example that is more complex and subtle than usual occurs in Wordsworth's line "The still sad music of humanity": the phrase attains a music of its own in the consonance (*s*, *m*) and in the pattern of its repeated vowels. More goes on in the sounds of poetry than you will be able to account for, but you should at least keep your ears open and attentive to the sound effects. The ways in which sound and rhythm create special effects is well illustrated in Pope's *Essay on Criticism*:

True ease in writing comes from art, not chance,
 As those move easiest who have learned to dance.
 'Tis not enough no harshness gives offense,
 The sound must seem an echo of the sense.
 Soft is the strain when Zephyr gently blows,
 And the smooth stream in smoother numbers flows;
 But when loud surges lash the sounding shore,
 The hoarse, rough verse should like the torrent roar.
 When Ajax strives some rock's vast weight to throw,
 The line too labours, and the words move slow;
 Not so when swift Camilla scours the plain,
 Flies o'er the unbending corn, and skims along the main.

(Zephyr is god of the West Wind, Ajax a Trojan hero noted for his strength, and Camilla a fleet-footed virgin warrior queen.) Note how the sounds and meter of each couplet correspond with its imagery and subject.

- 17) Genres of poetry are frequently defined at least in part by their metrical form as well as by their function or purpose. BALLADS usually use the ballad stanza (or a variation of it) to tell a story. SONG is more loosely used for any simple lyrical verse. ELEGY laments someone's death, or concerns itself more generally with death. ODE, the most elevated lyrical genre, has a formal stanzaic structure, traditionally in a repeated three-part pattern, the second stanza opposing the first, and the third stanza resolving the opposition. The SONNET is the most highly structured form: 14 lines of iambic pentameter, sometimes rhyming abba abba cdecde (or a variation thereof)--called a Petrarchan sonnet (after its originator) or Italian sonnet, or sometimes rhyming abab cdcd efef gg--called a Shakespearean sonnet (after its first major practitioner) or English sonnet. The divisions within the Petrarchan sonnet--an octave and a sestet--often complement one another: for example, the octave may pose a difficulty which the sestet resolves. In the Shakespearean sonnet the three quatrains may be used to present three complementary images or three successive stages, which are capped off by a couplet that may turn the meaning of those quatrains in a new direction. Some sonnets combine the Petrarchan and Shakespearean features.

- 18) All three kinds of literature--lyric, dramatic, and narrative-- employ FIGURATIVE LANGUAGE as a way of giving shape and impact to what may otherwise be abstract or vague or remote. Of the various figures of speech, SIMILE explicitly draws a comparison between two objects by using *like* or *as*, but unlike an analogy, where the comparison is based on logic, a simile makes a more fanciful or imaginative comparison. While the act of comparison may be straightforward, the grounds for that comparison are often more complex. “My love’s like a red, red rose / That’s newly sprung in June”: this simile points explicitly to the similarity of newness or freshness, but also implicitly to the quality of beauty. It also calls to mind other resemblances, such as the passion suggested by the color red, and the fulfilment of blooming. Still other likenesses may be possible--does the poet mean to call attention to the frailty and the short life of the rose?--while other features, such as the rose’s thorn or its photosynthesis, seem inappropriate in this context and therefore beyond the meaning of this simile. Interpretations will vary. Whatever your reading may be, if you want it to be valid critically, you need to account for it logically. Note how the two terms of the figure establish a relationship that generates a much fuller and more complex meaning than would be possible without such a figure. The comparison of love to a rose is traditional. Whether this instance of it is then trite and flat, or timeless in its simplicity and refreshing in its straightforwardness, depends on the frame of mind you bring to your reading of the line, and the sensitivity with which you take into account the ramifications of the simile.
- 19) A METAPHOR makes the same kind of comparison but does so implicitly. For example, “my love is a rose beyond compare” treats “my love” as though it were a rose, though of course we take this figuratively, not literally (unless it is a bee that is speaking). Logically we understand that in some sense “my love” is like a rose: by leaving out *like*, the statement goes beyond comparison to present imaginatively a unified conception of the two objects. Metaphor is the Greek word for transfer, which in turn is the Latin word for carry over: we carry over or transfer the meaning of “rose” to “my love.” We see the one in terms of the other. The two parts of a metaphor have been designated tenor and vehicle: “rose” is the vehicle that carries the meaning for the tenor or subject of “my love.”
- 20) Sometimes metaphors and other figures of speech are thought of as ornamental or “poetic,” but in a philosophical sense all language is metaphoric: a word is a vehicle that designates something other than the sounds or letters of which it is composed. In our minds we transfer automatically the concept, idea, or image of the thing named to the word that represents it (automatically, that is, once we have learned the language). Metaphor in our more specialized literary sense applies to the artistic transfer of meaning, but sometimes that transfer is so subtle that we’re barely aware of it. When we say “the wind roars,” we may be giving a literal description of its noisiness, but then again we may be ascribing to it a hostility, an aggressiveness, or a beastliness that makes “roar” metaphoric.
- 21) PERSONIFICATION is the specialized form of metaphor that ascribes human qualities to abstract ideas or inanimate things. Liberty is personified in New York harbor as a robed woman holding her torch high. Time is commonly personified as an old man carrying a scythe and hourglass. The North Wind has a cloud-like face, puffing out his cheeks as he blows. Most classical deities may be understood as forms of personification: Venus personifies love; Diana personifies chastity. Satan personifies evil: in Hebrew “satan” means adversary, that is, the one who opposes God’s will, thus embodying the principle of evil. In each of these cases the personification has gone beyond a rhetorical figure of speech to become a character in its own right.

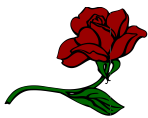


22) APOSTROPHE is often a means of introducing personification. Apostrophe (meaning literally a turning away from) occurs when a speaker turns away from his normal audience to address something or someone that could be present as a person not actually but only imaginatively. For example, Ben Jonson tells the earth “to cover lightly” the grave of his daughter. The very act of addressing an object implies that it has the ability to hear and respond, as though it were a person. Such an address may appear highly artificial, but it may also result from being deeply moved emotionally, as with Jonson’s apostrophe to earth. The psychological truth of apostrophe may be reflected in a person’s response to walking unexpectedly into a half-open door: “You blasted stupid door!” shouts the wounded victim, shaking a fist and blaming the door as if it were the door’s fault. Apostrophe is used to address not only things but also people who are not present, as Wordsworth calls out to his deceased daughter in “Surprised by Joy.” Addressing her like this invokes her presence imaginatively and establishes his immediate relationship to her.

23) SYMBOLISM allows an object to represent something greater than itself: our flag represents or symbolizes our nation; a heart symbolizes love; the cross symbolizes Christianity, the Star of David Judaism, and the crescent Islam. As with simile and metaphor, two things are brought together, usually an abstraction and a concrete object, and usually sharing some common features or having some other sort of connection, but symbolism has a different purpose--not to compare the two objects but to allow us to manage or comprehend an idea that may be excessively large. The symbol gives us a concrete and present object to stand for the values that may be abstract and vast, perhaps even beyond our comprehension. Thus a symbol may seem to take on the very essence of what it stands for, to participate in the reality of what it symbolizes. Hence soldiers have died in defense of their flag: the flag then is not simply a piece of cloth bearing an emblem on the end of a stick; it is the symbol of their country. Perhaps the most universal symbolism is money: a green piece of paper imprinted with a greenish picture of Queen Elizabeth and the figure 20 is twenty dollars, we say. Its intrinsic value is only a few cents, but because we all are willing to say that it is worth \$20.00, we can act on this agreement, and the symbol becomes, for all intents and purposes, what it symbolizes. Language itself may be understood as symbolic, similar to the way in which it is metaphoric (each term emphasizes a slightly different aspect of how language functions). Literary symbols may be traditional and conventional, as the cross or the flag. The rose has become a traditional symbol for love simply by being used this way so frequently over the centuries. A literary symbol may also be personal or esoteric, its symbolic meaning arising out of the particular way an author uses it, for example the compass as a symbol of the union between Donne and his wife in “A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning,” or the turning gyres as a symbol of history in poems by Yeats.



24) Figures of speech are one way of introducing IMAGERY into otherwise abstract language. Robert Burns gives the abstraction of love a concrete form and color by comparing it to a red, red rose. Imagery refers to anything that can be apprehended by the senses--sight or hearing, less often touch, taste, or smell, and sometimes bodily sensations such as balance or kinesthesia. Love itself is not an image, though the concept of love may be presented through such images as a red rose or the beautiful shape of Venus or the act of Christ’s washing his disciples’ feet. Notice how an image has a more or less definite form or outline. Imagery may be literal as well as figurative, as in Felicia Heman’s description of “The flame that lit the battle’s wreck” in “Casabianca,” but literal imagery always has the potential to become figurative. Memories often come to us through images, and one image tends to evoke others by association. Images can be loaded with feelings--of attraction or revulsion, of desire or fear, of consolation or guilt--often without our being able to name exactly what those feelings are. Then the image becomes a way of expressing that unique feeling, functioning itself as though it were a word. A single feature may elicit a much fuller image, a series of images, or a complex system of imagery, just as a name elicits a whole person, and perhaps an image of that person and a sense of what that person means to you. Often the imagery of a literary work will be drawn from a particular area that helps to characterize



the subject and mood. Understanding literature involves taking account of the imagery--imagining what an object looks like and how it feels to be in its presence.

- 25) Our response to a story or poem may also be due to the TONE in which it is presented. Tone is usually a subtle and difficult term to define in literature. You may think of it as tone of voice from the oral tradition: a storyteller can indicate suspense, excitement, revulsion, etc., through his pace, pitch, and emphasis in speaking. A written text lacks these signals, but often the writer will imply them through techniques of style, diction, or organization. Whether the tone is cynical or naive, humorous or earnest, insulting or complimentary will make a big difference in how we understand a literary work.
- 26) IRONY is one of the most subtle and interesting tones of literature, one that can usually be identified by the way the writer sets it up. An ironic statement says one thing and means another, calling our attention to some disparity in what things mean--perhaps a disparity between appearance and reality, or between motive and stated intention. For example, look at the opening of *Pride and Prejudice*: "It is a truth universally acknowledged that a single man in possession of a good fortune must be in want of a wife." How can you tell this is ironic? Would all single rich men agree that they want a wife? The statement then is not a truth and certainly not universally acknowledged, so why would Austen say so? Most readers move into the story before fully appreciating the irony here, and soon come to see that this statement represents the point of view most particularly of Mrs. Bennet, who is anxious to marry off her daughters: the ironic statement reveals her egocentric point of view, her limited outlook on the world. Irony is not necessarily sarcastic (just as sarcasm is not necessarily ironic): Austen's statement does not insult Mrs. Bennet but humorously and obliquely reveals how Mrs. Bennet projects her views onto the object of her designs.
- 27) These various figures of speech occur in our everyday language, as you have seen in some of the examples above, only we usually use them in a conventional manner without giving much thought to how they work. The literary artist refines these figures, developing them in more subtle and more complex ways, controlling them more carefully, and giving them greater impact. To understand our reading fully, we need not merely to label and classify the various forms and figures of literature, but also to explore how they function to create the meaning of the literary work. Careful study of how these forms and figures are developed in the works we read is the best way to gain a fuller understanding of them. When a passage you are reading strikes you as especially significant or powerful, see if its effect is due to one of the techniques listed above, and if so, examine the particular way the author has used that technique. Is the figure of speech prominent or unobtrusive, trite or fresh, strange or common? How fully can you develop its implications? How well does the technique fit in with the form of the work?
- 28) The definitions of literary terms given here are partial and incomplete; they are intended to be a starting point for your study and a guide to some of the interesting aspects of literature. There are many more literary terms, such as emblem, allegory, myth, allusion, metonymy, synecdoche, paradox, hyperbole, and onomatopoeia. Some of these may come up in your course of study, and some of them you may want to look into if you find them useful or interesting. The terms discussed above cover the basics needed for first-year English courses. For fuller treatment of these terms and more, there are many good literature handbooks. Here is a highly selected list. Some of these works refer you to more detailed studies.

Abrams, M. H. *A Glossary of Literary Terms*. Thomson Nelson, 2005. Most widely used.

Frye, Northrop, Sheridan Baker, and George Perkins. *The Harper Handbook to Literature*. Addison-Wesley, 1985.

This and the next handbook include some alternate explanations and some additional terms.

Holman, C. Hugh, and William Harmon. *A Handbook to Literature*. 6th ed. New York: Macmillan, 1992.

Preminger, Alex, ed. *The Princeton Handbook of Poetic Terms*. Princeton UP, 1986. "Poetic terms" include imagery, irony, figurative language, and other terms that apply to prose and drama as well as poetry.

Preminger, Alex, and T. V. F. Brogan, eds. *The New Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*. Princeton U P, 1993. Incorporates the above and much more.

You can also find reference works on the internet, such as <<http://newark.rutgers.edu/~jlynch/Terms/>>
Handbooks on poetry in particular:

Hollander, John. *Rhyme's Reason*. 2nd ed. Yale U P, 1989. Explains the effects of meter in metrical lines that exemplify those effects.

Pinsky, Robert. *The Sounds of Poetry*. Farrar Straus & Geroux, 1998. A popular and perceptive approach

Steele, Timothy. *All the Fun's in How You Say a Thing: An Explanation of Meter and Versification*. Ohio U P, 1999. Another good treatment of the mechanics and the effects of meter.

4. Guidelines for Writing Essays

Whether you are writing a one-page essay to address a problem succinctly, a thousand-word essay to analyze some part of your reading, or a longer research paper, your essay needs a beginning, middle, and end which should serve to introduce, develop, and conclude your central idea. When you begin, your central idea may be vague, your method of development uncertain, and your conclusion only a hunch; but as you work your way through the writing of your essay, you can clarify and refine your central idea, choose the best way to develop it, and proceed to a well-supported conclusion. To do so, you need to start early and allow yourself enough time.

Your central idea provides the thesis of your essay, presented in your introduction in a way that establishes the focus, scope, and purpose of your essay. If your assigned topic is in the form of a question, then try to answer that question in one sentence that is as precise as you can make it: that answer will be your thesis statement. If your assigned topic is not in the form of a question, then formulate your own question that examines some aspect of the assigned topic that you want to explore, and then compose an answer that will serve as your thesis sentence. The rest of your introductory paragraph may account for the importance of your thesis, indicate its ramifications, identify the method you are applying, or set the limits of your essay.

Now that you have answered the question briefly and directly, you need to support that answer with evidence from the text, and develop in detail its significance for understanding the work of literature that you are writing about. Consider using comparison, definition, or analysis to examine your central idea thoroughly. Organize the development of your essay in a logical manner.

As you write, keep in mind your audience and your purpose. Your instructor does not need to have the plot summarized or the poem reiterated, but your instructor does need to see clear, specific reference to those parts of the text that support your statements. Let your writing show how you read the particular work of literature and how you make sense of it. Your purpose is to deal with your topic, to develop its importance within the context of the literary work, to account for the conclusion that you are leading to, and thereby to show how well you understand what you have read.

You may find that, in the course of developing your main idea, you have modified your thesis statement. Go back and adjust the thesis so that it takes full advantage of what you have worked out in your discussion. Also this is a good time to formulate a title for your essay that identifies your topic. A good title indicates the point you will make and catches the reader's attention.

Finally, your conclusion should draw upon your whole discussion to show the significance of your main point.

Throughout your essay you should support and clarify your argument by referring to specific parts of the text you are discussing, by quoting, paraphrasing, or citing particular details. Follow the MLA style of documentation to identify all your sources (Gibaldi). ("Gibaldi" in parentheses indicates that the source referred to here is listed at the end under the author's name.) To identify the exact location of your reference, put the page number or, for poems, the line number in parentheses at the end of the quotation. For longer poems divided into books or cantos, use arabic numerals for both book and line number. For example, the first line of *Paradise Lost* is identified as (1.1). Lines from plays are identified with arabic numerals for act, scene, and (if the play is in verse) line; so *Hamlet* 3.1.56 would be "To be, or not to be." At the end of your essay include a list of works cited, giving the particular edition you have used. For fuller detail, see the *MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers* (Gibaldi).

Writing an essay allows you time to consider carefully what you have to say, so take advantage of that time by planning and writing a first draft within the first few days after the assignment is given, setting it aside for a few days, and then coming back to it to have a fresh look. Examine the soundness of your argument. Reading your essay aloud, perhaps to a friend or classmate, often helps you to examine more carefully what you have written. Check for accuracy, logic, clarity, conciseness, and effective writing. Remove wordiness, vagueness, and excessive generalization. Use active verbs and precise diction. Adjust your sentence structure for variety and emphasis. Check for any grammatical errors—sentence fragments, subject-verb agreement, pronoun reference, and so on. If you have any questions, refer to a good writing manual. There are a number of good writing manuals available: those by Aaron, Buckley, Rook, Rosa, and Troyka, (listed below) are among the ones used by instructors in the English Department. These manuals will give you much fuller information on effective writing—appropriate diction, sentence construction, organization of paragraphs, smooth transitions, unified development, and so on. Improving your writing improves your reading, and your grade.

If you are using secondary sources, use them critically: judge for yourself how applicable and valid they are. Acknowledge your indebtedness precisely so as to avoid plagiarism and to let your reader understand the context of your argument. Use parenthetical documentation in your text and include secondary along with primary texts in your list of works cited at the end of your essay, following the MLA Handbook (Gibaldi). You can receive help in locating secondary sources from your instructor, from the librarian at the reference desk, and from <http://www.umanitoba.ca/libraries/>, where you will find information not only about using the University libraries but also about writing papers, evaluating information, avoiding plagiarism, and citing sources.

Format your essay according to standard manuscript conventions (also in Gibaldi): double-space with margins of one inch on top, bottom, and both sides. Use only one side of 8½ by 11 inch white paper. Typewritten papers are always preferable; handwriting may be acceptable if it is legible, but ask your instructor first. Number your pages. Provide your name, course name and number, and date along with the title of your essay on the first page.

The guidelines are intended as a basic, generic instructions. They should be adapted to the assignment as given by your instructor.

Works Cited

- Aaron, Jane, E., and Elaine Bandor. *The Little Brown Essential Handbook for Writers*. Toronto: Longman, 2005.
- Buckley, Joanne. *Fit to Print: The Canadian Student's Guide to Essay Writing*. 6th edition. Toronto: Thompson Nelson, 2004.
- Gibaldi, Joseph, and Walter S. Achtert. *MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers*. 6th ed. New York: Modern Language Association, 2003.
- Rook, Constance. *The Clear Path: A Guide to Writing English Essays*. 3rd Canadian ed. Toronto: Nelson Thomson, 2004.
- Rosa, Alfred, and Paul Eschholz. *The Writer's Brief Handbook*. Toronto: Longman, 2005.
- Troyka, Lynn Q. *Quick Access: Reference for Writers*. 2nd Canadian ed. Toronto: Pearson (Prentice Hall), 2004.

5. What the Grade on Your Essay Means

In assessing the quality of your essay, your instructor adheres to the university scale of grades:

A = excellent, B = good, C+ = satisfactory, C = adequate, D = marginal, and F = failing. Each essay has its own unique mixture of strengths, weaknesses, faults, and merits, which are resolved into a final single grade. The chart below gives the general criteria for grading followed by most instructors in the English Department. Weighting of these various components will vary according to how they work in any given piece of writing. (Abbreviations in italics are explained in section 7, Marking Symbols and Abbreviations.)

| | A | B | C | D | F |
|---|---|--|---|---|--|
| Thesis | substantial, well defined, significant, well developed | sound, clear, general | may be too broad or obvious | weak or mis-directed or mistaken | missing or mistaken |
| Organization Over-all | clear and effective, smooth transitions | well ordered | some awkward connections; conclusion only repeats introduction | disjointed | organization not evident or not logical |
| Paragraph | topic sentences developed coherently | unified and coherent | some problems with unity, coherence and development | such problems more serious | lack of unity and coherence |
| Sentence | varied in structure and length to suit the purpose; appropriate emphasis; effective parallelism & subordination | complex structures may have some errors: <i>//, dm, mm, sub, co</i> | more such errors, or overly simple structures; repetition, wordiness, or passive verbs | more serious errors and weaknesses | inadequate control of sentence structure |
| Logic | sound and clear | evident | weak or confused | mistaken or missing in part | mistaken or missing |
| Diction | precise, effective | correct, appropriate | problems with level of diction, idiom, or usage | such weakness or errors that interfere more seriously with clarity | an excessive number of errors |
| Mechanics grammar spelling punctuation | free of errors; punctuation used to good effect | few minor errors such as <i>ref, agr, verb, vt, sp, p</i> | more serious errors such as <i>frag, cs, fs, agr, vt, verb, ref, cap, sp, p</i> | errors that interfere with clarity | errors serious and excessive |
| Use of Sources primary & secondary (according to the assignment) | well chosen, accurately quoted and clearly acknowledged; reliable and representative | adequate use of quotation and reference | may need to quote more fully and carefully; or quotations may be excessive or inappropriate | quotations are ungrammatical or do not fit into context; no quotation when required | misused or plagiarized |

6. What to Do with Your Marked Essay

After you have seen what your grade is, try to figure out what it means. Of course it adheres to the university scale: A = excellent, B = good, C+ = satisfactory, C = adequate, D = marginal, and F = failing; but you need to know much more. Is your essay good because you have presented a worthwhile argument in a competent manner, or is it merely good because your brilliant ideas were not well presented or well supported? Is your essay poor because it simply did not have much to say, or because it did not address the assignment, or because your good interpretation was seriously marred by faulty grammar? Assess your writing by carefully rereading what you've written, checking the terms of the assignment, and checking the literature you have written about.

Errors in writing may be marked using the abbreviations from your writing manual, or see the next section below, "Marking Symbols and Abbreviations." If you don't immediately see what the mistake is, or if you don't see how to correct it, refer to your writing manual—either to the inside cover or to the index, and then to the relevant section of the manual to read a fuller explanation. For errors in spelling, usage, word choice, diction, or idiom, consult your dictionary as well. If you are still unable to understand what is wrong, ask your instructor.

To deal with the markings on your paper most effectively, sort them out according to the kind of correction required:

- 1) Mistakes in grammar, spelling, punctuation, and documentation are usually straightforward. Faulty writing usually lowers your grade; if grammatical errors obscure your meaning, they could lower the grade even more. Be sure you understand the relevant rules or conventions; then write out your corrections so that you'll be less likely to repeat them. Keep a checklist to help you detect errors when revising future essays.
- 2) Problems with diction, usage, sentence structure, clarity, and logic may range from weak or ineffective to outright mistaken. These often require more careful analysis and assessment to figure out the best revision.
- 3) Weaknesses in development and mistaken or inaccurate use of details require you to go back to the literary work to check accuracy, balance, and thoroughness.
- 4) The overall shape of your essay--its unity, coherence, paragraph structure, and organization--may need strengthening or reforming. The effectiveness and achievement of your essay depend upon these matters of form as well as matters of substance.
- 5) Consider how the good ideas in your essay could be sharpened, strengthened, extended, or developed further.

If after reviewing these matters carefully you do not understand the markings or comments on your paper, ask your instructor. Also, if you are not sure how to go about correcting the mistakes or addressing the problems in your paper, discuss the matter with your instructor. If you ignore or forget your mistakes, you are apt to repeat them.

If, after carefully reviewing your paper and the relevant literature, you feel that your grade is unfair, the instructor may reconsider it if you will write an explanation of what you think is unfair in the marking. You might want to answer any questions that the comments raise, clarify points that you think the marker did not understand, and support your argument against any objections the marker may have made.

Try to learn as much as you can from your marked essay, and make notes to help yourself write a better essay next time and a better final exam. Keep your essays during the year and have them available whenever you have a conference with the instructor or teaching assistant.

7. Marking Symbols and Abbreviations

The following abbreviations and symbols are commonly used to identify mistakes in writing and will be found in most writing handbooks (sometimes in slightly different forms). If your essay is marked with one of these abbreviations or symbols and you do not understand what is wrong, use a writing handbook or a dictionary, or both, for further explanation of what the error is and how to correct it. If you still do not understand what the error is or how to correct it, ask your instructor.

| | | | |
|---------|---|-----------|--|
| art | article (a, an, or the) misused | shift | shift in verb tense or mood, or in point of view |
| awk | awkward | slang | inappropriately low diction |
| cap | capital letter | sp | faulty spelling |
| case | error in verb case | sub | faulty subordination |
| coh | lack of coherence | sexist | sexist language |
| coord | faulty coordination | t | The verb tense is faulty. |
| cs | comma splice | trans | A transition is needed. |
| dev | faulty development | transpose | Change the word order as indicated. |
| diction | faulty or inappropriate wording | u | unity lacking |
| doc | documentation of sources missing, incomplete, or inaccurate | usage | faulty usage—see a dictionary. |
| emph | faulty emphasis | v or vb | verb faulty |
| frag | sentence fragment | var | lack of variety in sentence structure |
| fs | fused sentence (also called run-on) | w | wordy |
| hyphen | error in hyphenation | ww | wrong word |
| idiom | not idiomatic English | // | faulty parallelism |
| ital | Use italics. | ^ | Insert at this point. |
| lc | Use lowercase letter. | # | Add space |
| mixed | mixed construction (also referred to as alignment) | ○ | Close up space. |
| mm | misplaced modifier | Ⓝ | Delete |
| mood | wrong verb mood | ¶ | Start a new paragraph. |
| num | numbers in wrong format | no ¶ | Do not start a new paragraph. |
| pl | error in the plural form | ✓ | good point, or aptly put |
| ref | error in pronoun reference | ? | Questionable |
| rep | repetitious | ?? | Not understandable |