

Writing for the Humanities

<http://www.geneseo.edu/~easton/humanities/convhumpap.html>

Introductory pitfalls. The following are errors that inexperienced writers make when writing introductory paragraphs.

Praising the bard. Frightened at the blank five or ten pages they have yet to fill, some students rely on a warm-up sentence that goes something like this: "The great Renaissance poet and playwright, William Shakespeare, masterfully wrote his famous play, *Hamlet*, just as the sixteenth century drew to a close." Rarely do opening lines like this have anything to do with the thesis of the paper, and they should be edited out in the final draft. Your professor and your fellow students are doubtless aware of Shakespeare's (or Locke's or Woolf's) well-received reputation and have no need for information extraneous to your topic. Only include such phrases if they startlingly contrast commonly received ideas. E.g., "Many have praised Shakespeare as the greatest of poets writing in English, but he is far surpassed by the exquisite wit and expression of the stand-up comedian Andrew Dice Clay." Be prepared, of course, to defend your extraordinary claims.

Lab talk. The noun "essay" is derived from a French verb that means "to try" or "to attempt." When you write an essay, you are yourself using a literary form. An essay is an extended work of prose composed to explore or examine an idea. It is not a scientific proof, and the rhetoric of the laboratory has no place in your Humanities essay. In poorly written essays, such "lab talk" shows up in a sentence like this: "In this paper I will prove that Gulliver maintains his ironic role through the end of the fourth book of Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*" You may, indeed, follow a scientific route in crafting an inductive argument, one that gathers examples and draws conclusions by examining them together. But inductive arguments, as any scientist will tell you, are never exhaustive. Claims of proof about an object of interpretation will not lend your paper any authority. You gain authority through the originality, thoroughness, and intelligence of your analysis.

Therapy thesis. Most people have had the experience of being personally moved by a literary work. Harry Mulisch's novel, *The Assault*, or James Baldwin's novel, *Go Tell it on the Mountain*, might parallel a self-discovery experience you have had. Reading a poem like Dylan Thomas' "Do Not Go Gentle into that Good Night" might force you to face your love and grief for a parent or relative who has died. The

cathartic power of art has been appreciated since the days of the early Greeks, and an emotional response to a work of literature is a legitimate response. When Odysseus bows his head to hide the tears he sheds in listening to the singing of the poet in the court of the Phaiakians, however, he is not writing a Humanities essay. The fact that a poem or a play touched a raw nerve is great. But not every response we have to a text is an appropriate response for a college essay. You need not deny your feelings in your essay; you simply need to take care that they do not assume the place of analysis. Make sure you discuss the primary source, rather than simply focusing on what it reminds you of in your life.

Good Starts. It is as impossible to prescribe a formula for the opening line of a Humanities essay as it is to tell a philosopher, historian, or novelist what the first line of her work should be. If you believe that your purpose is simply to satisfy an assignment that scarcely interests you, feel free to start your essay with a sentence that will allow your reader to share your boredom. But if your object is to attract the interest of your reader, craft a sentence about your topic that introduces it in a dignified, yet unexpected, manner. An essay's **topic** is the narrowed down idea you have decided to discuss as it relates to the text you are considering. E.g., you might choose to write about scatological references in *Gulliver's Travels*. Somewhere within your first paragraph you want to include a sentence or two that describes your thesis. A **thesis** is your assertion about your topic, a statement that indicates to your reader what the direction of the argument in your essay will be. Just as you want to avoid hubristic claims of "proof" in your thesis, you should also avoid shy qualifications. There is no need to muffle your thoughts with phrases like, "I believe that" or "In my opinion." Your reader assumes that everything you write that you do not attribute to another author is your opinion.

Writing analysis. "To analyze" means to pull something apart to carefully examine the pieces. When you analyze a treatise, a satire, a novel, or a document, you select lines or passages to INTERPRET and make a claim about the whole work. Sometimes you analyze the author's mode of expression: Why is this choppy? clear? tongue-in-cheek? replete with biblical references? Sometimes you interpret the objects the author has written about: Is size important? Does Locke know anything about native Americans? Is an exploding stove symbolic of psychological repression? Is a cigar just a cigar? Sometimes you explain the patterns of imagery and metaphors the author has created: Why is Gulliver obsessed with his excrement? Why does Fake Ploeg start a sanitation company? What does it mean to go "to the lighthouse"? All of your analytical passages combine to support your essay's thesis.

Creating your own organization. It is not necessary to imitate the chronology of the work you are analyzing. Since both you and your reader have completed a reading of the text you are discussing, you can draw upon examples from all sections of that text in whatever order best suits your argument.

Limiting Description. When writing about a treatise, a satire, a novel, a document, etc., remember that your reader already knows the plot or substance of the text. Concentrate on how the author expresses what happens. You can refer to events and ideas without describing them as though they were completely new to your reader. E.g., rather than telling your reader, "Jefferson argues for the American colonies to break away from the domination of Britain," you can say, "Jefferson's argument that the American colonies break away from the domination of Britain combines inductive reasoning with an emotional rhetorical appeal." From there you would provide textual examples, and comment upon each one you select.

Using Secondary Sources. Secondary sources include textbooks, encyclopedias, dictionaries, books on a subject, journal articles, AND introductions and notes included with a primary source. Cliffs Notes and other "study guides" are unacceptable secondary sources for a college-level Humanities paper.

When you are required to incorporate secondary sources into your essay, you must make sure that you are not simply writing a report. Your essay is still governed by your thesis. Never let a secondary source dominate your essay. It offers supplementary information to your interpretation of the primary text. ALL information that you derive from a secondary source must be noted. Please use the parenthetical documentation style that appears below.

Using quotations. Here is an oxymoron on the use of quotations: sparse bounty. It is hard to claim that you are interested in the way an author expresses himself if you fail to demonstrate that expression in your essay. On the other hand, you want to make sure that the passages you quote, whether in a primary or secondary source, need to be quoted. Quote only passages that would lose their effectiveness if they were paraphrased. Never use a quotation to substitute for your own prose. Your prose must control your essay. This is particularly important when you draw upon secondary critical sources. Unless you are going to analyze a long passage of criticism, you should paraphrase what the author has to say. ALWAYS INCLUDE A TAG LINE ON ANY QUOTATION YOU INCLUDE IN THIS ESSAY. For example, a minimal tag line might be

In *The Second Treatise of Government*, John Locke claims, " . . . "

Is this clear? Handbook writers call quotations without tag lines "dropped quotations." A quotation should never appear in the prose of your essay without some of your words attached to it. Don't just borrow someone's else's words because they sound good (even if you provide a citation). Writing is hard work. Do it.

There are also positive reasons to cite sources. Your reader will certainly want to know the context of your quotation or paraphrase. If a secondary work sounds interesting, your reader may want to know where to find it. Finally, it is important to distinguish another writer's ideas from your own so that you get credit for the original thinking you have done.

Good endings. Put your pen down. Take your fingers off the keyboard. Think about why you care about this topic. Without looking at the words you have written, but fully informed by the examples you have provided in the body of the essay, write a draft of a concluding paragraph. Start a few sentences this way: "This approach to this novel is important because _____. "I now understand _____ about this topic, because _____. "After spending time with this philosopher I can see that he _____. " When you compose your final draft of this concluding paragraph, edit out these phrases and keep the assertions in the blanks. The draft sentence, "After spending time with this philosopher I can see that he is not really religious but he includes many biblical quotations in his essay to make himself sound more credible" BECOMES in a final edited version, "John Locke infuses the *Second Treatise* with biblical quotations to gain rhetorical credibility rather than to demonstrate religious faith." You remind your reader of your discussion, and you conclude with a well-founded claim. Expand in a few more thoughtful sentences, and you have your conclusion.