

2. PAPERS IN LITERATURE

Papers are expected to remain attentive to the literary specifics of their subject matters. In other words, they must treat literature either as a textual, language-based construct (e.g. narrative techniques in Thomas Hardy's fiction), or as a phenomenon that exists in a given cultural-historical context (e.g. the interrelatedness of politics and theatre in the UK in the 1950s), or as a dialogue between text and readership (e.g. the reception of Vladimir Nabokov's novels in Hungary). Various comparative or interdisciplinary approaches (e.g. a comparative study of Conrad and Ishiguro's fiction, or Shakespeare in film) are also welcome. Students can treat literature virtually in any context, yet their subject matter should remain literature. As only one example, it is acceptable to write a paper about characterization in *Romeo and Juliet*, however, it is not acceptable to turn the topic into a general discussion of teenage psychology. Remember that literary characters are elements in a textual design, and not flesh-and-blood human beings. As another example, it is acceptable to write about World War II in Joseph Heller's *Catch-22*, but only as a motif or narrative representation. To find out about the various historical details of the war itself one should read books about history, and not a thesis paper in American literature. In short, a literary essay or thesis paper requires the discussion of a literary text in one of the senses provided above.

Plot summaries should be avoided. You can presume that the reader of your essay is familiar with the literary text that you discuss, and if your reader is not, a mere summary of the main events cannot be regarded as a substitute for the given piece of literature. The only case when a detailed summary is recommended is when the paper focuses on some narratological issue, in other words, when the plot or the storyline is the actual subject matter of the essay or thesis.

Discussions of the life of the authors of the works in question should likewise be avoided unless they are clearly relevant to your chosen topic and approach.

There are certain statements that are best avoided in writing about literature.

These include:

- statements that you cannot have real personal insight into, like "Language was at the centre of Joyce's interest throughout his career as a writer." (Such a statement can only be a strong argument if you have read all or most of Joyce's writings. If you still need to make a point like this — because, for instance, you want to bring examples that illustrate or refute it — rely on and refer to a pertinent critical work.)
- statements that do not give precise information, like "This short story is a very interesting one, and very strange things happen in it."
- statements that cannot be approached critically (because they are too subjective, too indefinite, or too general), like "James Joyce is the greatest novelist of the 20th century."
- statements which present your own conclusions as if they were facts, even though there may be other interpretations. For instance, a statement like "Clay is the symbol of death in the short story entitled 'Clay' by Joyce" is much less acceptable than a more qualified statement like "Clay can be seen/regarded as the symbol of, among other things, death in Joyce's short story entitled 'Clay.'"
- statements which present your own convictions as if they were indisputable truths, like "No good writer writes for money" or "All good art comes from suffering."
- statements that rely on (such) disputable and/or extra-literary axioms, like "This story is good, because it reflects the writer's feelings." "The writer was wrong to make this character likeable, since lying and getting drunk are nasty things."

- sentences which link two or more statements without making their relationship explicit, as in “Joyce was unhappy about Ireland’s colonial status, he lived on the Continent most of his life.” (What conjunction should the reader supply, “and” or “although” or “therefore” or something else?) In general, try to formulate your ideas as precisely and as clearly as you can.

THE MLA STYLE

All papers in literature should follow the guidelines of the MLA style. The practice required by the Modern Language Association (MLA) places **citations of sources directly in the text, in parentheses**. These parenthetical citations refer the reader to a list of **works cited** at the end of the paper.

In-text Reference

The basic elements of the citation are the **author’s last name** or a **shortened but easily understood form of the title** (with, if necessary, the volume number), and the **page number** of the material used from the source. The author’s name and the title of the source can be omitted from the parenthetical citation if they are clearly identified outside the parentheses nearby in the text. Further, if only one work by a given author is listed in “**Works Cited**,” the work’s title can be omitted from the parenthetical citation.

Nineteen Eighty-Four supports the argument that “every artist is a propagandist” (Orwell, *Essays* 2: 41). As critic Richard Vorhees points out, the novel is Orwell’s most ferocious propaganda (87).

Works Cited

The **list of works cited** appears at the end of an essay or thesis, and it includes sources that you have actually used and cited in your paper. Works that you do not refer to but that have contributed to your general literary or historical erudition should not be listed. The works cited section is arranged **alphabetically by author**.

The first line of each entry is flush with the left margin; **subsequent lines are indented** to leave five spaces (hanging indentation). If you use more than one work by the same author, list the works alphabetically by title. Give the author’s name with the first title but **substitute three hyphens for the name in subsequent entries**. For example:

Thomas, Lewis. *The Lives of a Cell: Notes of a Biology Watcher from the North West*. New York: Viking, 1975.

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Give last names first and provide full first names (as opposed to initials). Include the place of publication, the publisher, and the latest copyright date as shown on the copyright page. Give a shortened form of the publisher’s name as long as it is clear.

For further details check out the MLA guide at:

<p>MLA Guide https://owl.purdue.edu/owl/research_and_citation/mla_style/mla_style_introduction.html</p>
