



HINTS FOR WRITING EFFECTIVE PARAGRAPHS OF LITERARY ANALYSIS

GENERAL PURPOSE

Well-organized paragraphs have four components that work together to produce a coherent, unified product. Think of each paragraph as a mini-essay endeavoring to prove one aspect of your thesis statement. That is, each paragraph should:

- Make a debatable claim (the topic sentence).
- Provide proof for that claim (the evidence or support).
- Show how the evidence supports the claim (the analysis).
- Contains effective transitions both within the paragraph and between the paragraphs so that the reader can follow the logic of the argument (transitions).

1. TOPIC SENTENCE

The topic sentence is to the paragraph what the thesis is to the entire paper. That is, a paragraph's topic sentence states the claim or argument of that paragraph. The topic sentence usually asserts a claim that will support one part of the paper's larger thesis. For example, imagine that the paper's thesis is the following:

By the end of "Sonny's Blues," the narrator is liberated from his warped personality; he finally begins to feel, which means he will be freed from his fear and sadness.

This paper has a lot to prove. It must begin by proving that the narrator does indeed have a "warped" personality. Thus, the topic sentence of that paragraph might be:

Though many readers may sympathize with the narrator because his brother is addicted to heroin, the narrator actually begins as a hardened, unfeeling man. Two scenes show his lack of compassion.

Notice that, like a thesis, a topic sentence can be more than one sentence if necessary.

2. SUPPORT

Support or evidence usually refers to quotations from or summary of the literary work. Without support, your topic sentence will go unproven and your paragraph will fall flat. (If your topic sentence does not seem to require support, it probably isn't an effective topic sentence to begin with). Working with the topic sentence above, we might use the following two pieces of evidence:

1. The way the narrator treats and thinks about Sonny's friend.
2. The narrator's flashback to his encounter with Sonny in the Greenwich Village.

Think of quotations as **evidence** for your main point/argument.

- If used correctly, quotations will make your argument stronger, but they cannot stand by themselves (i.e. the reader needs to know the evidence's purpose). For example, in a murder trial a piece of evidence might be a bloody rag. However, this evidence is useless unless it is clear whose rag it is, where it was found, and what it implies for the trial.

Make sure that readers know the **purpose** and **context** for every quotation in your piece. **Introduce** each quotation and **draw a conclusion** from it. This conclusion must relate to your thesis and thus connect to the main argument of your paper.

When you are considering using a quotation, ask yourself three questions:

- How well does the quotation illustrate or support my analysis?
- Is this quotation the best evidence of the point I am making?
- Why am I quoting the text instead of paraphrasing or summarizing it?

3. ANALYSIS

With analysis, you tell your reader how you want him or her to understand the quotation or summary you have provided as support. As a writer, you can't necessarily assume that your reader will draw the same conclusions you have drawn from the evidence. For example, some people might interpret the narrator's treatment of Sonny's friend as kind, because he gives the friend a cigarette and some money. But that interpretation doesn't work for your argument, so you need to elaborate, through your analysis, on your own interpretation. Thus, support and analysis go hand in hand. Here's an example of some analysis following the support cited above:

The narrator shows how cruel and unfeeling he is when he meets Sonny's friend on the street. Adopting a sarcastic tone, the narrator questions the friend's motives: "*You come all the way down here to just tell me about Sonny?*" We can see in this tone that the narrator doubts that the friend truly cares for Sonny. *The narrator also swears at the friend, saying, "you're pretty goddamn smart, I bet," and offers him no sympathy for his "sad story," declaring that he wishes the friend had a pistol so he could kill himself (49).* These reactions to the friend show the narrator's anger at the situation Sonny is in, but also convey a stark

lack of compassion for those less fortunate than himself. In fact, the narrator’s anger seems to fuel his lack of compassion. *In the flashback scene, we find out that the narrator has been angry with Sonny before, for when the narrator visits Sonny in his Greenwich Village apartment, he tells Sonny that he “might just as well be dead as live the way he was living” (62).* These scenes depict the narrator’s warped personality; his anger and fear have made him cruel, almost sadistic.

4. TRANSITIONS

Well organized paragraphs use transitions between the topic sentence, support, and analysis which let the reader know where the argument is going. Simple transitions such as “for example,” “for instance,” “therefore,” “however,” and “also” are useful to show relationships between ideas. More complex transitions can be whole phrases or even sentences that show how the writer is moving from one idea to another. A transition (purple) that links this paragraph to the next might be:

Not only is the narrator cruel and unfeeling toward those he views as hopeless deadbeats, *but he lacks emotion in his dealings with his wife and mother.*

Notice here how the transition and the topic sentence (in italics) have been woven together into a single sentence. Here’s our whole sample paragraph together. Re-read it now and notice how it incorporates each of the required components of an effective paragraph.

Though many readers may sympathize with the narrator because his brother is addicted to heroin, the narrator actually begins as a hardened, unfeeling man. Two scenes show his lack of compassion. The narrator **first** shows how cruel and unfeeling he is when he meets Sonny’s friend on the street. Adopting a sarcastic tone, the narrator questions the friend’s motives: “You come all the way down here to just tell me about Sonny?” We can see in **this tone** that the narrator doubts that the friend truly cares for Sonny. The narrator **also** swears at the friend, saying, “you’re pretty goddamn smart, I bet,” and offers him no sympathy for his “sad story,” declaring that he wishes the friend had a pistol so he could kill himself (49). **These reactions to the friend** show the narrator’s anger at the situation Sonny is in, but they **also** convey a stark lack of compassion for those less fortunate than himself. **In fact,** the narrator’s anger seems to fuel his lack of compassion. **In the flashback scene,** we find out that the narrator has been angry with Sonny before, **for** when the narrator visits Sonny in his Greenwich Village apartment, he tells Sonny that he “might just as well be dead as live the way he was living” (62). **These scenes** depict the narrator’s warped personality; his anger and fear have made him cruel, almost sadistic in wishing for the deaths of his brother and his brother’s friend.

Use “signal phrases” to introduce quotations and integrate them into the flow of your paper. Signal phrases tell the reader who is speaking and indicate where your ideas end and someone else’s begin. Verbs that you should keep in mind when constructing signal phrases include the following:

- Acknowledges
- Admits
- Believes
- Compares
- Confirms

- Declares
- Endorses
- Grants
- Implies
- Insists

- Points out
- Reasons
- Reports
- Responds
- Suggest”

Consider the following example:

McTeague, by Frank Norris, suggests that man's natural instincts are often evil in nature. Norris illustrates this in the scene when Trina is lying unconscious in McTeague's dentist chair. Suddenly McTeague is overcome with the urge to take advantage of her. He battles with his conscience but ultimately loses, unable to stop himself from kissing Trina on the mouth. "He could only oppose to it [the foul stream of hereditary evil] an instinctive stubborn resistance, blind, inert" (23).

Now look at what happens when a signal phrase is used and a conclusion is drawn:

McTeague, by Frank Norris, suggests that man's natural instincts are often evil in nature. Norris illustrates this in the scene when Trina is lying unconscious in McTeague's dentist chair. Suddenly McTeague is overcome with the urge to take advantage of her. He battles with his conscience, but ultimately loses, unable to stop himself from kissing Trina on the mouth. Norris suggests that McTeague does not have the capability to reason with his impulse, that "he could only oppose to it an instinctive stubborn resistance, blind, inert" (23). Here, McTeague portrays sexual longing as something that needs to be controlled; it is an instinct that must be battled.

Observe how in the second example, the signal phrase introduces the quotation and integrates it into the body of the paragraph. Also, note how the author draws a conclusion from the quotation, relating it to the essay's main idea.

SOME FINAL TIPS

QUESTIONS TO ASK OF YOUR WRITING

- Does my thesis move my readers beyond the surface of the text(s)? Does my thesis have enough depth to unfold a new understanding for my reader? Is it appropriately limited in scope to allow me to focus my analysis on a key aspect of the text(s)?
- Does my essay have a meaningful organization that purposefully moves a reader from one idea to the next rather than from one example to the next? Before moving to a new idea/assertion, do I provide and discuss adequate support?
- Do I use relevant textual support to substantiate my thesis? For each example meant to support my thesis, do I use only those pieces that are relevant to my claim?
- For each piece of textual evidence presented, do I offer discussion that sheds light on its significance within the context of my thesis? Will my reader understand why I am using a particular example/quotation?
- Do I waste space on unnecessary summary of stories and plots? Do I make purposeful choices about when to summarize, paraphrase, and quote primary and secondary sources?
- Do I use proper MLA format for my paper and in documenting sources?

COMMON PITFALLS TO AVOID

- *Lack of an adequately complex thesis*—a good thesis moves your reader beyond a simple observation. It asserts an arguable perspective that requires some work on your part to demonstrate its validity.
- *Excessive summarizing*—your task is to move beyond mere summary to help a reader understand a not-so-obvious idea. You can assume your reader has read the literature but that he/she will not remember every detail relevant to your perspective.
- *Assumption that there is one correct or “hidden” meaning*—your essay should aim to expand your readers’ understanding of a text, not to present a single, definitive meaning. This means that you are offering and supporting one potential interpretation.
- *Excessive quoting*—when quoting in order to provide textual evidence, use only the relevant part of the quotation. When you establish a claim/assertion and provide textual support, be sure to explain the relationship between the quotation and the assertion. Your reader can’t read your mind.
- *Lack of adequate support*—a well-crafted thesis requires substantiation in the form of textual evidence. Often, if your thesis doesn’t make a complex, arguable claim, the act of substantiation becomes difficult. Take care to develop a thesis that will require purposeful use of textual evidence.
- *Improper use of a critical lens*—if you are using a particular critical approach/literary theory in analyzing a text or set of texts, be sure you have a good understanding of the critical lens you will be using.
- *Use of personal asides and value judgments*—your task is to shed light on what a text *does* and to make assertions grounded in textual evidence, not in personal opinion.
- *Shifting verb tense*—when writing about literature, use present tense, even if the events take place in the past.
- *References to the composition of the essay*—you do not need to refer to what your paper is doing or what you plan to do in the essay. Instead, move your argument forward—if your ideas are clearly and logically argued, your reader will recognize what you are doing without the need for announcements.
- *Reference to the author by his/her first name*—it is customary and respectful to refer to the author using his/her last name. The first time you mention the author, use his/her full name.

ONCE MORE ON THE IMPORTANCE OF SELECTING SOLID EVIDENCE**WHAT IS EVIDENCE?**

Evidence is the facts or sources that support your written argument. In literature, for instance, evidence would be a quotation from the text that helps you make your point. In a write-up of a scientific experiment, evidence would be the data you collected in your experiment that prove or disprove a thesis.

WHY DO WE NEED EVIDENCE?

Evidence is central to any written argument because it provides the facts around which you create your argument, your opinion. Without evidence, an argument is a windy, flimsy statement of one person's opinion. With evidence, an argument is grounded in facts and given shape. Evidence is the critical link that helps you prove your points.

CAN EVIDENCE SPEAK FOR ITSELF?

No. This is where you come in. It is simply not enough to drop a quotation into your paper and expect your reader to be convinced of your point.

SO HOW CAN WE SPEAK FOR AND THROUGH EVIDENCE?

When you use evidence, your role is to show your reader that evidence supports your argument. Consider your role as writer analogous to that of a lawyer in a court of law. When you introduce evidence, you must tell the jury—your readers—why this evidence supports your argument. Evidence must be analyzed and interpreted. What does the evidence say and how should your reader understand it? How does the evidence support the larger ideas at work in the paper? You need to make these connections for your reader.

UNSUCCESSFUL USE OF EVIDENCE (AS IF IT SPOKE FOR ITSELF):

Frederick Douglass gains self-confidence when he fights back against the cruel slave-owner Mr. Covey. Douglass notes that the battle “rekindled the few expiring embers of freedom and revived within me a sense of my own manhood. It recalled the departed self-confidence and inspired me again with the determination to be free” (Douglass, 1845, p. 43). This quotation alone captures the essence of Douglass's feelings after his self-reliance was challenged by his slave master and he prevailed.

PROBLEM: This use of evidence does not work because the author does not show why the evidence is important, or what it does. The writer repeats rather than analyzes what is said. Her thesis is about self-reliance, so she should focus on how this quotation shows that Douglass became self-reliant.

ANOTHER UNSUCCESSFUL USE OF EVIDENCE (THE WRITER “DUMPS” THE QUOTATION AND DOES NOT EXPLAIN IT):

As a self-conscious boy, Douglass relied on other slaves' mistakes to protect him. He was always aware of how white men could trick slaves and make money for themselves and so he never trusted white men. “White men have been known to encourage slaves to escape, and then, to get the reward, catch them and return to their masters” (p. 25).

PROBLEM: Not only does the writer fail to introduce the quotation with his own words but he also “dumps” the evidence. What did you learn from this paragraph? What's the author's point? Are the first and second sentences connected? To leave a quotation at the end of a paragraph is to leave your job undone. You must tell the reader why the quotation is significant and show how the quotation connects back to your main idea.

SUCCESSFUL USE OF EVIDENCE TO SUPPORT IDEAS:

Emerson believes that people must accept who they are and embrace their talents and their minds. We've all been taught the saying, "No pain, no gain." Emerson goes one-step further, claiming that "A man is relieved and gay when he has put his heart into his work and done his best, but what he has said or done otherwise, shall give him no peace. It is a deliverance that does not deliver" (Emerson, 1993, p. 20). He is explaining here that one's heart truly needs to be dedicated to his task in order to reach fulfillment. Achieving fulfillment is, in essence, a step towards self-reliance.

WHAT IS GOOD HERE: This author uses evidence, an actual quotation and correct citation of author, year, and page number, a) to provide a scholarly record of where to find this reference, and b) to support his points. The writer's thinking here is clear in that he analyzes the evidence and draws conclusions from it.

WHAT TO KEEP IN MIND:

Whenever you use a quotation, show your reader the thinking that went into choosing that quotation. What does it mean and why is it relevant to your point? Evidence is the framework of an argument, but you must do the arguing around that framework. If you want your reader to believe your argument, you must do the thinking for your reader. It is up to you to tell your reader what to think about the evidence you provide.