

Writing for Literature Classes

- What is My Literature Professor Looking for?
 - **Clarity of message** – Write your paper in a manner that is easy to follow and understand. Make evident the “angle” from which you are approaching the work. Professors also look for a progressing or unfolding train of thought, and your personal interaction with the work.
 - **Focus** – Try to support your main point without going on tangents; that is, give the reader enough background information to understand the evidence presented without shifting the focus of your paper to the evidence.
 - **A student’s own ideas** – For your main point, focus on an issue in the literature that you have questions about. What bothers you about a particular section of a work? What questions do you have that are not answered in the work?
 - **Presentation** – A good literature paper will add to the discussion of a piece of literature by presenting a work through a new and different perspective (your perspective).
 - **Use of vocabulary** – appropriate vocabulary and proper documentation should be used properly to present your point. For example, use literature terms that were introduced in class.
 - **Proper use of assigned material** – Try to incorporate evidence from the work you are writing about. A good way to do this is through properly cited direct quotations from the work. When not directly quoting or attributing a section of text to another author, be sure to paraphrase and cite appropriately.
 - **Use of additional sources** – You may find it helpful to use works written by the same author, books of criticism, and literary journals (written by professionals in the literature field) to support your thesis. Professors like a thesis that is accurate and well documented.
 - **Tone** – When writing about your interpretation of a work, be sure of yourself. For example, the use of words like “could” or “might” may decrease the impact your thesis has on the reader or make your paper less convincing and authoritative.

- Frequently Asked Questions

- **What documentation style do I use?** – The documentation style depends upon the class. MLA is usually used; however, some instructors will allow students to use a style they are more familiar with. Resources to help you with documentation are available on the CUW Writing Center website: <http://www.cuw.edu/writeplace/>
- **How do I begin?** – Remember what you are writing for. Present questions, answer questions, and discuss issues that are of interest to you. Make sure you have a good knowledge of the work. To acquire this knowledge, many literature professors stress a second and third reading. A dictionary should also be used, as one misunderstood word could potentially lead to an incorrect interpretation.
- **What if I don't have enough to write about?** – Go back and review the literature again. Develop what you already have in your paper in more detail. Ask questions; take the place of a critic. A discussion with your professor regarding a topic and your ideas may also help.
- **Can I use the passive voice?** – In most cases, the author of a piece of literature died long ago, yet his/her words still speak to us today. Because of this, the active voice should be used to add interest and action to your paper. Always be consistent with voice and verb tenses.

Resources:

Personal communication with Dr. Edward Veith, Dr. Thomas Wilmeth, and Dr. Sally Canapa; Concordia University, Wisconsin Professors of English.

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