



WRITING ESSAYS ABOUT LITERATURE

Third Edition

A Guide and Style Sheet

KELLEY GRIFFITH, JR.

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藏书章

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For Gareth and Bronwen

PREFACE

I wrote this book in response to needs that constantly arose in my literature courses. When I assigned out-of-class essays, students would respond with perplexity and even panic: “What should I look for?” “What do you want?” “How long should the essay be?” “Do we have to use footnotes?” Some students had never written essays about literature, at least not for a long time. They felt lost and did not know where to begin. After trying to cope with such responses, I realized I wanted a book that would not only offer my students the assistance they needed but would cover most of the aspects of writing about literature. That book would introduce students to the study of literature, define key terms, explain details of usage, and include whole essays that would serve as illustrations of good student writing.

Although *Writing Essays About Literature: A Guide and Style Sheet* has evolved over its three editions, it still tries to accomplish these purposes. It does so in three general ways. First, it provides guidance in reading literature. Reading well, it stands to reason, is essential to writing well. But reading is also an end in itself, and this book provides an introduction to literature that should make the reading experience rich and fulfilling. The largest section of the book—chapters 3 through 8—discusses the three major genres—fiction, drama, and poetry—and offers ways to analyze individual works. It provides questions and exercises for reviewing and thinking about works. It suggests criteria for evaluating the quality of works. And its reading lists and discussion of critical approaches invite students to expand their studies beyond the scope of this book.

Second, the book offers comprehensive guidance for writing about literature. The organization of the book reflects the four stages of the writing process: prewriting, drafting, revising, and editing. The first part of the book deals with the prewriting or invention stage of the process. Chapter 1 establishes a rationale for writing about literature: Essays about literature are arguments; their purpose is to persuade. Chapter 2 explains strategies for sparking thought processes and for evaluating the quality of topics. Chapters 3 through 8 present methods of generating ideas about individual works that could serve as essay topics and theses. These chapters define the elements of literature, but equally important, they provide devices—questions and “thinking-on-paper” exercises—that should help students use these definitions to develop their own ideas. Chapter 9 covers the next stage of the writing

process, drafting. This chapter explains how students can use reasoning and organization as means to move from early to final drafts of the essay.

Third, the book serves as a style sheet for the third and fourth stages of the writing process, revising and editing. Chapter 11 offers general advice about revising, provides rules for quotations and other matters of usage common to essays about literature, and gives guidelines for the appearance and format of the essay. The chapter on documentation (chapter 10) explains what research papers are, how to find information and opinion, how to incorporate them into essays, and how to document sources using MLA style. The book concludes with a chapter on taking essay tests and a chapter containing six student essays—two each on a short story, a poem, and a play. All of these essays illustrate good principles of literary analysis and serve as good examples of student writing.

New in this Third Edition are more suggestions for generating ideas and topics (chapter 2), the “thinking-on-paper” exercises relating to the elements of literature (chapters 4, 5, and 6), more bibliographies “for further reading,” an expanded chapter on critical approaches, including post-World War II literary theory (chapter 7), and a new chapter on reasoning and organization (chapter 9).

The book is not meant to be an all-inclusive treatment of the study of literature; rather, it explains succinctly how to go about the rewarding task of thinking about and discussing literature. The work can be used in many ways. Instructors can use it as a textbook in introductory courses or as a supplement in more advanced courses. Students can use it on their own as an introduction to the study of literature, as a guide to writing essays about literature, and as a reference manual.

I am grateful to many people for their help. I am indebted to the writers whose works I have consulted. I thank my colleagues Walter Beale and William Tucker for reading and criticizing this work in its initial stages and for making suggestions for improving it once it was published. My colleague Marilyn Tyler provided thought-provoking reactions to the first draft of the chapter on reasoning and organization in this edition. During the revision of the first edition, I incorporated the valuable comments of Laurence Perrine, Frank Garratt, Tacoma Community College; George Gleason, Southwest Missouri State University; John Hanes, Duquesne University; Jacqueline Hartwich, Bellevue Community College; and Irving Howe, Hunter College. Reviewers for the Second Edition also provided insightful suggestions: Suzanne O. Edwards, The Citadel; James H. Iddings, University of Nevada, Las

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The Essay About Literature

LIKE ALL ART, literature gives pleasure. It has a certain magic that transports us from the “real” world to a seemingly more remote and enjoyable place. We can experience this quality without thinking about it. But literature also poses intellectual challenges that do demand thought. For most readers, grappling with these challenges enhances the pleasure of literature. By studying literature, we “see” more of it to appreciate. And we often learn that, far from being remote from life, good literature pleases by reflecting and giving order to life and by redefining our own place in the real world.

ESSAYS ABOUT LITERATURE ARE USUALLY ARGUMENTS

Essays about literature are written works that take up the intellectual challenges posed by literature. They raise and try to answer fascinating and challenging questions: How does the work reflect its time? How does it reflect the author’s life and thought? What does it mean? What are its techniques? Is it good art? Has it had an impact on society? What human problems does it portray? What implications does it have for our own time? But you will write better essays if you recognize another quality of essays about literature: They are almost

always arguments. An *argument* is an essay that has three main qualities. It persuades an audience of the validity of your ideas. It uses facts, reasoning, and sometimes testimony (the commentary of people other than yourself) to explain and support your ideas. And it has a *thesis*, one overall point that ties together all the specific claims in the essay.

There are two reasons why essays about literature are usually arguments. The first emerges from the relationship between the work and its reader. Good literature is complex. It communicates on many levels of meaning and by many methods. A single work may exist as a system of sounds, of symbols, of ideas, of images, of analogies, of actions, of psychological portrayals, of moods, of grammatical structures—all of which are separate entities, yet all of which interrelate. Furthermore, good literature also invites the reader to participate in creating the work. A work is not complete until it is read. The author leaves “gaps” in the work for readers to fill with the imagination. The completed work—the work that is read—is something more than the words on the page. It is a collaboration between text and reader. As a result, perceptions of a work vary from age to age, reader to reader, even reading to reading. This variability of perception occurs because no single reading, however careful, can take in all the elements of a work, or synthesize them into all their structural relationships, or include all the vantage points from which even one reader might experience a work.

Consequently, no single view of a work, whether your own or someone else's, can be the all-encompassing or final view. Cultures change, people change, and as a result, perception changes. It is a common experience for people as children to enjoy works—*Huckleberry Finn*, *Gulliver's Travels*, “Rip Van Winkle,” *Alice in Wonderland*—and as adults to enjoy them again, but for very different reasons and with entirely new understandings of them. This does not mean that all interpretations of a work are equally valid. Interpretations of literature are subject to the same rules of human thought—accurate observation, sound reasoning, systematic procedure, thoroughness of treatment—as any other interpretive discourse. But no single interpretation can encompass the whole work.

Because literature is complex and can be perceived variously, essays about literature are usually arguments. You, the writer of the essay, cannot take for granted that your reading of the work is the same as your reader's. Your reader may have missed the very facts

in the work you have found most compelling or most “obvious.” Your reader may have a totally different understanding of the work from you. If, therefore, you want your reader to grasp your reading or accept it as valid, you must explain and persuade. You must write an argument.

A second reason that essays about literature are usually arguments lies in the relationship between the writer of the essay and the audience of the essay. When you write essays of any kind, you establish a relationship with an audience—your readers. The subject matter of your essay strongly influences the nature of this relationship. Literature is a subject matter that creates certain expectations in your audience. Because literature is a complex product of the imagination, readers of essays about literature expect you to interpret it—to explain, to clarify, to analyze, to give the meaning of it. And interpretation demands argumentation. Consider, by way of comparison, two kinds of essay that differ from argument: the subjective essay and the informational essay. Do they meet an audience’s expectations when the subject matter is literature?

In the *subjective essay*, writers retell their own experiences and especially their own emotional reactions to them. The first person pronoun, “I,” is omnipresent because the subject matter is really the “I” and the feelings of the “I.” People read subjective essays because they are interested in the person writing, in his or her unique point of view, or in the way the person writes, not because they believe the writer is consistently, profoundly, precisely, or objectively developing a given topic. When literature is the topic of the subjective essay, comments about it remain vague and inexact: “In my senior year, I absolutely absorbed *The Great Gatsby*”; “I never could get the hang of Shakespeare’s sonnets”; “Hawthorne bores me”; “Last night’s production of *Waiting for Godot* left me speechless”; “Caddy’s plight in *The Sound and the Fury* never fails to move me deeply”; “Eliot’s poetry strikes me as being dryly witty”; “Tolstoy is for me the greatest novelist”; “Shelley’s poetry is too abstract.” In brief, the subjective essay fails to meet the expectations of an audience interested in literature because the writer says nothing meaningful about it. The audience may learn about the writer but little if anything about the literature.

The *informational essay* is more revealing about literature than the subjective essay but is nonetheless limited in what it can deliver to an audience. As its name suggests, the informational essay exists to present information. Perhaps the best examples of the informational essay are

the nonfiction articles in popular magazines like *McCall's* and *Popular Mechanics* or in more literary magazines like the *New York Times Magazine* and *Atlantic Monthly*. These essays may have a unifying idea that looks like a “thesis,” but in fact the idea is simply a handy way of framing the facts the article wants to present. The facts are there not to support a line of reasoning or a thesis but because the writer thinks they might be interesting.

Informational essays about literature do exist, and you might have occasion to write one yourself. If so, ask yourself if your audience already knows the information you plan to present or if the audience wants to know it. You could, for example, write an essay showing that the Russian writer Anton Chekhov based the events and characters of his story “The Lady with the Pet Dog” on his own life. But having done that, what have you accomplished? How would you respond to a reader who says, “So what? I wanted to understand Chekhov’s story better, and all I am getting from this paper is facts about Chekhov’s life”? A limitation of purely informational essays is that they do not *use* the facts they present. There may be times when a reader might be interested in facts about authors, the locals they depict in their works, and the details of how and when their works were written and published. The magazine *National Geographic*, for example, often runs glossy features on authors: Dickens’s London, The Brontës’ Yorkshire, Twain’s Mississippi River, Scott’s Scotland, Wordsworth’s Lake Country. Presumably the readers of these articles might want to go to these places, or to use the text and photographs to imagine themselves there, or perhaps even to visualize the places described in the works. But usually readers want information about authors and their works in order to understand the works better. This is one feature that informational essays in their purest form do not provide.

The subjective essay and the informational essay rarely exist in “their purest form.” If the subjective essay did nothing but express vague emotional reactions or if the informational essay did nothing but present one dry fact after another, each would probably be unreadable or at least extremely boring. Rather, both kinds of essay typically contain some elements of argumentation, just as many argumentative essays contain some elements of the informational and the subjective essays. Our point here is that whatever an essay about literature might contain of the subjective and the informational, it is predominately argumentative. It backs up its key claims, including those of an emotional origin, with reasoning, and it uses most of its facts to develop