

Sylvan Barnet



A Short Guide to

Writing  
about  
Literature

Fifth Edition

# *A Short Guide to Writing about Literature*

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FIFTH EDITION

**SYLVAN BARNET**

*Tufts University*



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# Preface

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Favorable response to the first four editions has allowed me to revise the book again. There have been many changes throughout, but the most obvious are the addition of a student's analysis of a story, of a student's review of a production of a play, and of the new Modern Language Association form of documentation.

"Types of Writing Assignments," beginning on page xv, following the Contents, lists the chief kinds of assignments, such as essays on character, imagery, style, and so forth, and it indicates the relevant passages in the text along with the illustrative essays. Thus, a student who is going to write about, say, the function of a character — whether in a play or short story or novel — will find, collected under Character, references to the book's chief discussions of the topic and also references to the three essays in the book that concentrate on character. Similarly, the student who is writing a comparison is referred, under Comparison and Contrast, to sample patterns of organization, and to three sample essays.

The first chapter, "Writing about Literature: An Overview," considers the nature of critical writing, treats two kinds of criticism (explication and analysis), and then discusses the problems of choosing a topic and organizing the material. The chapter ends with a brief summary of the process of writing a critical essay.

The second chapter, "Style and Format," is a fairly short and direct approach to the elements of clear writing. It treats such matters as denotation, connotation, subordination, paragraphs, and so forth, and provides a number of specific illustrations taken from good writers. The latter part of the chapter is devoted to manuscript form, quotations, footnotes, and bibliography.

The third chapter, "Practical Applications," discusses reviews, research papers, and essay examinations. It follows Chap-

ter 2 because it continues to deal with more or less mechanical matters, but of course in practice students will not be writing research papers or examinations until after they have become familiar with some or all the matters discussed in the later chapters on literature.

The fourth, fifth, sixth, and seventh chapters introduce the reader to various approaches used in writing about fiction, drama, poetry, and film. These chapters also include sample essays and a number of illustrative paragraphs that should help the reader to see what good writing is and to understand the sorts of problems good writers deal with.

Each of these last four chapters includes, about midway, an essay by a student, and each concludes with two essays by published essayists. The topics and approaches vary widely. Instructors do not want their students to imitate any specific essayist, but again it is useful to have samples of adequate prose and examples of some of the things people do when they write about literature. These essays, along with the earlier material on writing and documentation, may provide students with helpful guides to writing their own readable prose and developing their own approaches to writing about literature and film.

I hope that the preceding remarks tell readers all that they want to know about the scope of the book, but some further words must be added. Dr. Johnson said that "there is not so poor a book in the world that would not be a prodigious effort were it wrought out entirely by a single mind, without the aid of previous investigators." I cannot name all the previous investigators who have helped to shape my ideas, but I must acknowledge my indebtedness to Morton Berman, William Burto, and Marcia Stubbs, who never tire of improving my pages, and (at Little, Brown) to Carolyn Potts, Virginia Pye, Virginia Shine, and Billie Ingram. Others who have offered valuable suggestions include Rebecca Argall, James Blake, Randall Brune, David Cavitch, Warren Chelline, Charles Christensen, William Evans, Shearle Furnish, Bruce Golden, Okey Goode, Patricia Graves, Dean Hall, Gratia Murphy, J. M. Pair, and Virginia Shale.

# *Types of Writing Assignments: A Key to Advice and Examples*

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The index is the best guide for the student who wants to draw together all references to a given topic, for example on “character” or on “theme,” but the following Key may be useful for a student who wants to locate material — especially a sample essay — that will be of assistance in writing a particular kind of essay. Because the topics are not mutually exclusive, most of the sample essays are listed more than once.

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