

*sixth edition*

# STEP BY STEP:

Writing about  
*Literature*

PAT MCKEAGUE

**STEP BY STEP:**

# **Writing about Literature**

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*Sixth Edition*



**Pat McKeague**

*Moraine Valley College*



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"I have often thought how interesting a magazine paper might be written by an author who would—that is to say who could—detail, step-by-step, the processes by which any one of his compositions attained its ultimate point of completion."

Edgar Allan Poe  
*The Philosophy of Composition*

*Step by Step: Writing about Literature* is a companion to another Kendall/Hunt text entitled *Step by Step: College Writing* by Randy DeVillez.

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For my parents, Michael and Selma,  
who always believed in all their children.

# PREFACE



*Step by Step: Writing about Literature* can be used effectively in a variety of classes:

- ▶ composition classes that use literature as the basis for essay assignments;
- ▶ literature classes where students are expected to write about what they have read;
- ▶ humanities classes that include a study of literature.

To introduce students to the elements of fiction, poetry, and drama—character, theme, setting, point of view, symbolism, imagery, structure, and tone—each chapter contains the following learning activities:

- ▶ a thorough, easy-to-understand discussion of a literary concept;
- ▶ step-by-step instructions on how to choose a topic and organize the essay;
- ▶ a diagram of the structure of a typical essay, including instructions on how to produce an effective introduction, a well developed body, and a logical conclusion;
- ▶ student-written model essays that illustrate the suggested structure;
- ▶ a plan sheet and an evaluation form to guide the writer through the drafting process;
- ▶ a group exercise to actively involve students in the learning process.

The intent of the step-by-step approach is to take the mystery out of the writing process. By following guidelines and structural patterns, students learn the basics of good writing: focus, structure, organization, and development based on the literary analysis pattern. Mastering these skills will prepare them to write about any material they must analyze in college or on the job.

*Step by Step: Writing about Literature* can be used with any literature anthology in any class that deals with literature and composition. Each model essay can stand alone since it contains quotations from the work it analyzes to illustrate and support the writer's thesis. **In fact, each chapter offers at least three different model essays for students to study and imitate—more than other current textbooks on writing themes about literature.**

## **New material in the Sixth Edition includes**

- ▶ **more information on how to read and think critically about literature;**
- ▶ **additional models for documentation entries, including electronic sources;**
- ▶ **new student-written model essays in many chapters;**
- ▶ **additional information on using electronic research tools and on writing the research paper.**

All of the revisions and additions have one major goal: to increase student learning.



Students at Moraine Valley College have worked with these materials while they were being written and revised, and they have found them helpful; I have found that their essays improved significantly. I hope that you will also benefit from this latest edition of *Step by Step: Writing about Literature*.

# ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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I especially want to thank all of my colleagues for their support and for all of the things I've learned from them;

all of my students, especially those whose essays appear in this book, for all the things they have taught me;

all of my family and friends for their encouragement and support;

and

Randy DeVillez, Allan Monroe, Sandy Bryzek, Anne Reagan, Louann Tiernan, Bill Muller, Rod Seaney, Len Jellema, Betsy Teo, Nahid Shafiei, Jay Noteboom, John Sullivan, Jean McAllister, and Carol Garlanger for their help in preparing the revised editions.



# TO THE INSTRUCTOR



Since I have been teaching students how to write, I have probably learned as much as or more than they have. One of the things I've learned is that most students have strong doubts about their ability to write. As you know, they tend to believe that writing is some magical act or some miraculous experience in which a power greater than themselves moves the pen along the page. And, of course, this great skill is given only to a chosen few—certainly not to them.

To take writing out of this highly mystical, abstract world, I began teaching students specific patterns for writing by drawing diagrams of the different types of paragraphs and essays and by developing formulas for the different analytical approaches to writing. Making the process more concrete seemed to help my students understand the concept that there is a way to write clear, well organized essays in which they can effectively convey their ideas to their reader.

The material in the following pages has helped my students learn to write effective essays about literature. By understanding the literary concepts involved, by analyzing works of literature in class, by studying model student essays, and by carefully planning their own writing, students can master the process of writing.

Each chapter is a self-contained unit, so you can introduce the literary elements in any order that best meets your approach to teaching. That's why *Step by Step: Writing about Literature* can be used successfully with *any* literature anthology. I think you'll find that the supplementary material included with the new Instructor's Guide is general enough to blend effectively with most teaching styles. The transparency masters can be used to visually reinforce important concepts, and the extra exercises and handouts give students a chance to practice what they've learned.

It is my sincere hope that using this text will help make your students even better writers and that it will help make your teaching just a bit easier. May all your semesters be filled with good grammar, good paragraphs, good essays, and good students.



# TO THE STUDENT

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Studying literature is one of the best ways to learn about human beings and the ways they deal with life. As you read works in the three genres or types of literature—prose fiction, poetry, and drama—you will encounter all types of human personalities dealing with all types of human problems, and as you come to understand a character's motives, actions, and reactions, you will surely come to understand your own behavior and that of others better.

After you analyze a work of literature, you can clarify your thinking even further and share your insights with others by writing them down. As you return to the work to look for supporting quotes to back up the main point or thesis in your essay, your understanding of the work will increase, and you will come to appreciate the craft of the author and the unique way he managed to produce certain responses in you as a sensitive and informed reader. And when you write, you will be synthesizing your ideas and those of the author to produce an organized, well supported essay, one that can be appreciated and understood even by those who have not read the work of literature on which the paper is written.

Being able to write about what you've read is a skill that is invaluable in any college course, for you will often be asked to analyze in writing such things as journal articles, essays, reports, or experiments to demonstrate your understanding of them. It is my hope that this book will help you develop this important skill. The explanations, exercises, plan sheets, and model essays have helped my students at Moraine Valley College, and I am confident that if you use them as they are intended, you, too, will discover that there is a formula for writing that anyone can master.

And so the ability to write is not a gift given only to a select few; it is a skill that can be developed by learning and practicing certain organizational principles that hold true whether you are writing for a teacher, a supervisor, a customer, or even the chairperson of the board. Mastering these principles will pay off no matter what career you plan to enter, so let's get started right now.

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# The Elements of Literature

# 1



## OVERVIEW

The creator of literature is an artist whose main tool is words. Through them and with them, he creates a “mini” world of people living out a “limited” experience. We can see its beginning, middle, and end. To fully understand the art of literature, you should be able to identify the elements—the parts, the supporting structures—that work together to produce the overall effect a literary work has on its audience. By reading thoughtfully and thinking critically, you can learn to appreciate the relationship of literature to life.



## The Creative Process and the Elements of Literature

Writers are people, sensitive, aware, and intelligent, whose thoughts and experiences produce definite reactions—usually pleasurable, sometimes painful—in them. The desire to share these reactions generally leads them to create a literary work that they hope will produce the same effect on the audience. As authors begin to write, they determine what particular causes will produce the desired effect, and they work them into a world of their own making. Now this world will, in most instances, be similar to the “real” world, but the writers have total control over what events will happen to what people at what precise moments. They are “gods,” eliminating chance and establishing connections between and among the events in the work.

As the author plans the work, he or she may decide to write a poem, a form of literature sometimes distinguished from prose by its intense, compact use of language, by its unique appearance on the printed page, and by its use of devices like rhyme, rhythm, figurative language, and imagery. Perhaps the author will choose to share his or her ideas by writing a piece of prose fiction, either a short story, a novella, or a novel, depending on the length of its plot. If the author wants to present the plot by having actors perform on stage before a live audience, he or she will be writing a drama. These three literary forms—poetry, prose fiction, and drama—comprise the major types or genres of literature.

When writers create their worlds by using the medium of words, they use language in their own unique way, thereby illustrating their unique style. And whether these writers choose to write poetry, prose fiction, or drama, they will be using many of the same elements of literature. For example, a writer usually begins with a series of related actions—a plot—and then creates people—characters—to carry out these actions. The central character, the character whose will moves the action of the plot, is called the protagonist. The characters or forces that work against the protagonist are called the antagonists or

the antagonistic forces. These opposing forces—the source of conflict in the story—may be another human being, nature, the supernatural, society, technology, or even the protagonist himself.

In attempting to achieve a particular goal or objective, the protagonist—through his actions and those of others—learns significant things about himself, other people, and life. As he gains this knowledge, he experiences what is called an epiphany. This insight into life, which most often occurs at the climax of the work, changes the protagonist. He will never be the same because of the events which have occurred in his life. Because of this change, the protagonist is a dynamic or round character, one who is growing while responding to life's challenges. Characters who help in this growth process but who do not change themselves are called static or flat characters. They may be antagonists working against the protagonist, or they may be minor characters who sometimes function as foils, contrasting with the protagonist to reveal his or her qualities more clearly.

In deciding how to most effectively tell their story, writers choose an appropriate point of view. They may want one of the characters in the story to narrate in the first person, or they may wish to create a third person narrator, perhaps an objective one who reports only the words and actions of the characters or possibly an omniscient one who can describe the characters' thoughts and emotions as well as their words and actions. The method of narration is important because it directly influences the theme of the work, the idea or meaning writers wish the audience to gain from sharing this experience. In developing the theme, authors may also use symbols—characters, objects, actions, colors, or places with two levels of meaning—to underscore their point about life.

As readers, we come to this world of the writer willing to believe in everything he or she has created. As the plot pattern begins, the exposition introduces the characters, and we learn about their situation and their setting in time and place. In the next part of the pattern, the complication, we watch their conflicts or problems develop, study their responses to these difficulties, and pick up hints of the outcome through the author's use of foreshadowing. When the climax—the third part of the pattern—occurs, we reach the turning point in the story and learn whether the protagonist will or will not achieve his goal. The last part of the pattern is the resolution or *dénouement*, where we share the characters' insights into life and either glory with them in their success or weep with them in their failure. If we do our part by participating imaginatively and creatively in the characters' world, if we are willing to get involved, we are entertained as we wonder what will happen next, and we are instructed as we experience the message of the work; it has meaning for us.

And meaning is one of the primary reasons for reading literature. Through their works, writers hope to share their vision, their view of the human experience, and while we may not always agree with their ideas, writers help us to clarify our own values and attitudes toward life. We can also learn from a work by seeing it as the product of a certain period in history (the historical approach), as the product of a certain set of social standards and conventions (the social approach), or as the product of the writer's personal attitudes, conflicts, and concerns (the biographical approach). We can even analyze the motivation of the characters or the author by applying specific psychological theories (the psychological approach) or by noting the recurrence of certain types of characters, situations, or symbols that appeal to our unconscious minds in an instinctive and intuitive way (the archetypal approach). Looking at a work from any or all of these viewpoints will, most often, broaden our understanding of what it means to be human.

Unfortunately, however, we are sometimes unprepared for the experience the author wishes us to share. We may be too immature, too inexperienced, too insensitive, or too bored to consider or to understand the author's ideas. We should always keep in mind that what we get from a literary work is directly proportional to what we bring to it. If we bring open and perceptive minds, we will discover the pleasure and the insight that a well written work of literature can give.



## ▼ How to Read Literature<sup>1</sup>

Whatever your motivation may be, reading for pleasure, reading in preparation for an essay assignment or for class discussion, reading to help resolve another reader's questions, or reading for any combination of reasons, comprehension is pleasurable and lack of comprehension is frustrating. Two approaches, one general and one specific, will make reading literature a more pleasurable experience.

The general approach involves two steps:

1. Read the work quickly, concentrating on its literal level: who's who, what's happening, where is it happening, how is the action resolved?
2. Rethink the work. Is the author trying to make a point, to produce a reaction in me, to entertain? All three? How does the author want me to react? How do I know that? How do I react? Why? Why do I like, dislike, or have mixed feelings about the work? Is the outcome believable? Is it justified by what precedes it? Is the work conventional or unusual in terms of what I have read? What am I sure of? What is puzzling? Why?

Probably you will be able to answer some but not all of these questions. You are now ready for a more specific reading approach. This requires a second reading of the work, a reading focusing on six elements common to virtually all imaginative literature. As you slowly reread, using a dictionary when-ever necessary, take your time in answering six questions, one on each of the six elements.

1. What is the significance of the title? The title may direct your attention to a crucial incident, may focus on and evaluate a key character, or may imply or state a theme embodied in the work. You may be sure the title is somehow significant; the author has chosen and phrased it purposefully. Is it literal or figurative, appropriate or ironic? If its significance is not apparent, try to understand it as you reread the work.
2. What does the author accomplish in his first and last sentences or lines? Their contents are inevitably significant as a function of their position. Do they unify the work? Do they emphasize an idea? Why does the work begin at this point and end at that point?
3. Are names of characters, settings, or objects chosen appropriately, ironically, or accidentally? Names can be helpful clues to an author's attitudes toward his material.
4. What instances of repetition can be detected? Repetition is a guarantee of significance. Why are particular incidents, images, or ideas repeated? Why are particular phrases repeated? What is the author trying to emphasize in each case?
5. What is the nature of the conflict(s) and what is its (their) resolution? Resolution of conflict frequently emphasizes a theme. How does the author want the reader to react to that resolution? How does the reader know what reaction is desired? If the conflict is unresolved, why has the author purposefully left it so?
6. How has the author foreshadowed the work's conclusion? In a well constructed work, every incident, every character, every detail has a function. What apparently insignificant details can now be seen as significant instances of foreshadowing? What patterns of character and incident are established to lead inevitably to a particular resolution?

In *How to Read a Book: The Classic Guide to Intelligent Reading*,<sup>2</sup> Mortimer J. Adler and Charles Van Doren emphasize the importance of reading "with total immersion" and of "letting an imaginative book work on you." They suggest that you "let the characters into your mind and heart; suspend your disbe-

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<sup>1</sup> These reading approaches were formulated by Professor Allan Monroe of Moraine Valley Community College in Palos Hills, IL. Reprinted by permission.

<sup>2</sup> (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1972).

lief, if such it is, about the events. Do not disapprove of something a character does before you understand why he does it—if then. Try as hard as you can to live in his world, not in yours; there, the things he does may be quite understandable. And do not judge the world as a whole until you are sure that you have ‘lived’ in it to the extent of your ability” (218).

As you enter these imaginary worlds and become part of them, you will begin to understand the impact of the characters’ experiences on their lives, and when you read and think about literature in this way, you will be engaged in critical thinking activities.

## ▼ Thinking Critically about Literature

“Thinking . . . is any mental activity that helps formulate or solve a problem, make a decision, or fulfill a desire to understand; it is a searching for answers, a reaching for meaning.”<sup>3</sup> Any composition or literature class you take (or any class for that matter) should help you develop your thinking skills—skills that you will use in other classes, in your job, and in your personal life.

In his *Taxonomy of Educational Objectives*, Benjamin Bloom and his colleagues identified mental operations that we engage in when we think and learn. They are application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation.<sup>4</sup> Problem solving is also often added to this list.

Application involves using knowledge you have already acquired in a new or different situation. Analysis is the process of breaking down a whole by identifying and examining its parts, while synthesis involves a reverse mental operation of combining parts or ideas to form a new or expanded whole. Evaluation requires a judgment or decision about the whole and its effectiveness to determine if it has achieved its goals or objectives. And as its label suggests, problem solving attempts to identify a problem’s symptoms, determine its possible causes, and brainstorm for the best possible solutions.

Here are some ways that you can practice these skills while reading your assignments:

► **Keeping a Journal**—Writing is thinking because it forces you to formulate and shape your ideas in order to express them. That’s why keeping a journal about your reading helps you develop your thinking skills. An easy way to begin is by writing your reaction to a work. Did you like it or dislike it? Why? Try to relate your response to specific characters or events in the story. What emotions did you experience while reading? Does the story remind you of others you have read? Writing out your responses to the questions you should ask while reading literature (see page 3) will help you formulate a response to questions that your instructor might ask during class discussion. Thinking critically before class is a great way to become an active learner—not just a spectator.

A special type of journal is the *dialectical journal*. All you need to do is divide a page into two parts by drawing a vertical line down it. On one side, you can write your ideas as you read the work; on the other, you can record your thoughts and reactions after your instructor has covered the material. This double-entry approach can help you “to see relationships methodically, to discover and develop meanings.”<sup>5</sup> By reviewing your initial response in light of what you have learned, you will be engaging in metacognition—thinking about your thinking and becoming more aware of your own thought processes. Synthesizing your ideas with those of your instructor and classmates will enable you to arrive at new insights into a work of literature. Plus, some of your entries could probably be turned into excellent themes.

<sup>3</sup> Vincent Ryan Ruggiero, *Teaching Thinking Across the Curriculum* (New York: Harper and Row, 1988) 2.

<sup>4</sup> Benjamin A. Bloom, David R. Krathwohl, and Bertram A. Masia, *Taxonomy of Educational Objectives* (New York: David McKay Company, Inc., 1956) 191–193.

<sup>5</sup> Ann Berthoff, *The Making of Meaning* (Upper Montclair, New Jersey: Boynton/Cook Publishers, 1981) 122.