

A green desk lamp with a brass base and a brass chair are visible in the background. In the foreground, an open book lies on a dark surface, illuminated by the lamp's light. The pages of the book are yellowed with age.

Writing about *Literature.*

Step by Step

Pat McKeague

Seventh Edition

Instructional CD-Rom Enclosed

Writing about Literature:

Step by Step

Seventh 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

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

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Preface

Writing about Literature: Step by Step 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 an 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.

Writing about Literature: Step by Step 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 about literature.**

New material in the Seventh Edition includes

- additional information on how to read and think critically about literature;
- updated 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;
- an updated CD-Rom that includes Acrobat Reader 5.0 as the platform for additional exercises on composition and literature.

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 the seventh edition of *Writing about Literature: Step by Step*.



Acknowledgments

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, Margaret Lehner, 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 general 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 the order that best meets your approach to teaching. That's why *Writing about Literature: Step by Step* can be used successfully with **any** literature anthology. I think you'll find that the supplementary material included with the 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 class 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

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. As you come to understand the characters’ 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

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 Literature¹

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 whenever 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*,² 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 disbelief, if such it is, about the events. Do not disapprove of something a character does before you un-

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

² (New York: Simon, 1972).



derstand 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. Numerous mental activities are included in the thinking process. Careful observation, remembering, wondering, imagining, inquiring, interpreting, evaluating, and judging are among the most important ones. Often several of these activities work in combination, as when we solve a problem or make a decision. We may, for example, identify an idea or dilemma, then deal with it—say, by questioning, interpreting, and analyzing—and finally reach a conclusion or decision.”³ Any composition or literature class (or any class for that matter) should help you develop your thinking skills—skills that you will use in every aspect of your education, your job, and 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.⁴ 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, 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.”⁵ By reviewing your initial response in light of what you have

³ Vincent Ryan Ruggiero, *Teaching Thinking Across the Curriculum* (New York: Harper, 1988) 2.

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

⁵ Ann Berthoff, *The Making of Meaning* (Upper Montclair: Boynton/Cook, 1981) 122.



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.

Here is an example of a dialectical journal entry on Connie in Joyce Carol Oates' short story entitled "Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?"

Before class

I liked the story about Connie because she reminds me of some of my friends who are unhappy at home and who are anxious to grow up. She likes to flirt, and one day she flirts with a guy in a gold jalopy. When Arnold comes to her house to ask her out, she flirts with him again until she sees that he is older and that he is different. Connie wants what he has to offer—sex—but Arnold scares her (he scares me, too) to the point where she loses her will; she falls into his trap and follows him like a zombie. I don't know if she'll ever come back since she wants a different lifestyle.

After class

Connie's unhappiness is due in part to her family's attitude toward her; her mother puts her down and her father ignores her. Maybe that's why she is looking for love from all the boys to make up for her lack of love at home. Arnold—who is older—may even represent a type of father-figure for Connie. Arnold may also represent perverse sexuality because of the way he talks about love-making. He may be scary because of his disguise which seems to be hiding his devil-like features—a wig to hide horns, makeup to hide his ugliness, and boots to hide his hooves. The devil is capable of mind control, so Connie may not come back at all; in fact, she may have been taken to a real hell!

In the first journal entry, the student responded on a personal level to the events in the story by comparing Connie to people she knows. Then she summarized the events in the plot, reacted emotionally to them, and predicted what Connie's eventual fate will be. In the journal entry written after class, the student probed more deeply into Connie's character by analyzing the reasons for her unhappiness and for her interest in Arnold. She then cited evidence to support her claim about Arnold's real identity, pointing out his similarities to the devil. These points, raised during class discussion by analyzing the details the narrator presented about the characters, helped the student see beneath the surface events of the story and move to the real heart of the characters—their motivation.

- **Making Lists**—As you read your assignments, you may not have the time to write a detailed journal entry, so making a list of words or short phrases that convey your insights is a good way to capture those ideas that can easily escape your memory. If you read with a pen or pencil (still great implements of communication) in hand, you can make a brief list of ideas or images that can stimulate your imagination and lead to future journal entries or even thesis statements. If you are used to making "Things-to-do" lists, it's an easy step to making "Things-to-think-about" lists as well.
- **Making Metaphors**—The metaphor, a way of seeing one thing in terms of another, is a favorite tool of writers. It is an implied comparison, an analogy that suggests the similarities that exist in often very dissimilar things. In that way, a metaphor combines the creativity of the imagination with the insights of the rational mind. In their classic lyric "I Am a Rock," Simon and Garfunkel use a metaphor to show how a person can become hardened and rock-like from broken relationships. Toni Cade Bambara in her short story "The Lesson" uses the setting of F. A. O. Schwarz as a metaphor for the world of the rich.

As you read your assignments, you can create your own metaphors for the characters and settings you encounter by beginning with a statement of equality the way this student did when thinking about the central character in "The Secret Life of Walter Mitty" by James Thurber.



Walter Mitty is a _____ might become statements like Walter is a mouse, a tiger, a robot, a riddle, a magician, a VCR, a pawn, an old shoe, a copy machine. These metaphors for Walter suggest the multiple ways his character can be perceived, and, at the same time, they help develop the ability to think in terms of analogies. Why not give metaphor-making a try while you are doodling in the margins of your book or trying to capture the essence of a character for a thesis statement. It works!

- **Formulating Your Own Questions**—In most classes, students answer questions; they do not ask them. Unfortunately, this type of reactive behavior does not really prepare students to think on their own. As a student, you can reverse this passivity by becoming a questioner. As you read and find yourself wondering about any aspect of a work, write your question on a 3 x 5 card that you can use as a bookmark until the class meets. You can easily add questions that arise during class discussion on the same or additional cards. By asking your questions, you can turn any class into a discussion of the points that you find most interesting.

Here are some questions students have raised in class about Oates' "Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?": Why does Arnold have trouble standing in his boots? Can Arnold really see what's going on at Aunt Tillie's barbecue? Why does Arnold bring Ellie along if he plans on having sex with Connie? While these questions appear to be about the surface events of the story, they actually suggest the complexity beneath the narrative details; therefore, no question is "too simple" to raise as part of class discussion. If you are wondering about the meaning of something in the story, you owe it to yourself and to the class to ask about it. Questions stimulate the thinking process.

- **Solving Problems**—Narrative and dramatic works of literature revolve around a problem or conflict to be faced and solved by the protagonist. Although the author has resolved the conflict in some way by the end of the work, as an active reader and thinker, you could suggest other possible solutions to the conflict. What if the characters had made different choices? What if the circumstances were slightly different? What would you have done if you were the protagonist? What other possible solutions are there to the conflict? By asking questions that force you to think about and *beyond* the work, you are stretching your imagination and your problem-solving ability.
- **Concept Mapping**—You can visually outline a work by drawing a map or chart of its events, characters, relationships, or concepts, or by developing a time line of events or ideas. Doing this will help you analyze and then synthesize your ideas about the work as a whole. A concept map provides an overview that can quickly and easily be used for review purposes, like this visual analysis of the main plot and the subplot in *Ordinary People* by Judith Guest.

