

TAKING THE PAIN OUT OF WRITING

ABOUT SHORT STORIES

Do the words “Write an essay analyzing a short story” rate only slightly below “Open wide” on your scale of anxiety-provoking phrases? Don’t panic. Essays about literature are very similar to the essays you have already written in Composition I. You have the knowledge and skills you need to be successful. But there are a few tricks of the trade, a few pointers that can help make this a pleasant rather than painful task.

First of all, keep in mind that reading and writing about literature should be enjoyable. Choose a story to write on that you honestly like. Secondly, realize that after having read a story several times and given it considerable thought, you have become an expert on that story. It is your job to teach your readers something you find significant about the story and convince them of your point.

FIND A FOCUS

Before you begin, read and re-read the story, making notes as you go about whatever you find intriguing. Next decide on which aspect of the story you will focus. Will you discuss characterization, theme, imagery, structure, style, or another feature? The possibilities are endless, but it is important that you focus on only one aspect of the story. Say, for instance, that you have read Ernest Hemingway’s “A Clean, Well-Lighted Place.” You may find the two unnamed waiters intriguing, or perhaps you are interested in the conflicting images of light and darkness. Read the story again, taking notes and extracting quotes which relate only to that aspect of the story.

WRITE YOUR THESIS

Now decide what your thesis will be. In this essay, as in any essay, it is important that you have a clear thesis statement, a sentence which declares a specific point or argument. It may be helpful to think of a question your thesis will answer. For instance, you may wonder why Hemingway repeats the words “light” and “nothing” so often? Why is one waiter rude to the old man and one waiter kind? Why is none of the characters named in the story? Then you could argue in your thesis, for example, “Hemingway uses conflicting images of light and darkness to illustrate his ideas on mortality,” or “The older waiter is sympathetic to the old man because in him he sees himself,” or “The characters remain nameless in the story because they are all, in a sense, Everyman, in his youth, middle and old age.” Now you have a point to make, an argument to present, a thought to teach.

BUILD SUPPORT

Use the events and language of the story to convince your readers that you have a valid and enlightening idea. To help you do so, make an informal outline of you essay or at least a list of the evidence you will present from the story. After having drafted a thesis statement and an organization plan, you are ready to begin your essay draft.

INTRODUCE THE STORY TO YOUR READERS

In the first sentence of the essay, it is conventional to introduce the author and title of the short story you are discussing. For example, “In ‘A Clean, Well-Lighted Place,’ Ernest Hemingway relates the events of an evening in a café.” Then go on to gradually introduce the idea of your essay. You may want to do this as you briefly summarize the story. Summarizing the story here, *concisely*, may help you avoid the common pitfall of summarizing rather than analyzing the story later in your essay. Finally, at the end of the first paragraph, state your thesis as strongly and clearly as possible. You’re an expert, so write confidently.

AVOID PURE SUMMARY

In the body of your essay, develop your argument. Avoid discussing the story in chronological order. Instead, consider the specific points you need to make to lead your readers to your conclusion about the story. Then, choose from your evidence what you will use to illustrate your claims. You may summarize, paraphrase, or directly quote from those parts of the story which best support your ideas.

INTRODUCE DIRECT QUOTES

If you directly quote the story, always introduce the quotation and explain what you want your readers to see in it. For example, “Hemingway begins his story with the line, ‘It was late and everyone had left the café except an old man who sat in the shadow the leaves of the tree made against the electric light’ (32). In this way he establishes the significance of light and darkness from the very beginning of the story.” It’s tempting to let the quotations speak for themselves, but they are made more forceful by your commentary.

Finally, in the last paragraph, bring your essay to a close as you re-emphasize the thesis of your essay. You do not want to bring up new evidence at this point, but rather synthesize for your readers what you have written.

If you keep in mind the pointers of this handout, writing an essay on a short story should be a pleasant and painless experience.