

Some Pointers for Writing Papers in Literature Courses

Exposition

1. Limit your argument to a single, manageable topic that you can easily and reliably control. You are not expected to know everything about everything. Universal assumptions are usually impossible to prove conclusively, and they can simply be invalidated by just one single counter-example. Start with a specific observation and work from there. It is easiest to move from the concrete to the abstract, from the particular instance to the general principle.
2. Precisely define the key terms you are using. Words have different connotations in different contexts. The more abstract the word, the more it can be interpreted in different ways. Explain how you are limiting the use of your terms, so that your reader does not supply the wrong associations. You want your reader to draw the same conclusions that you do based on a common understanding of what is at stake. Do not quote dictionaries as the sources of your definitions unless they are supplying the exact definitions you wish to use in your own specific context.
3. Establish working criteria for making judgments. If you are trying to demonstrate that a text fulfills certain functions or expectations, explain what those functions or expectations are and how you would decide whether or not your standards are being fulfilled.
4. Avoid making broad and vague generalizations. Do not assume that your reader will believe anything you say simply because you say it.

Evidence

5. Provide specific examples to support your claims. Select the most appropriate passages from your text to illustrate the precise point you are trying to make.
6. You may quote passages directly or paraphrase what is happening in the text at that particular moment, but in either case you should supply references to the edition you are using and the specific page number where your example occurs.
7. If you are quoting passages from the text, short citations of three lines or fewer should be included in the main body of your paragraph within quotation marks and the page reference bracketed at the end or footnoted. Longer citations should be indented and single-spaced to set them apart from the rest of your paragraph.
8. Interpret the passage you are citing to demonstrate how it illustrates your point. Quotations do not speak for themselves. They need to be explicated and integrated into the rest of your argument.

Prof. James D. Cain

9. Any ideas you receive from outside sources (i.e. any ideas that are not originally your own) need to be fully referenced and documented with citations and bibliography.
10. References may be either footnoted or endnoted.

Development

11. Once you have established a clear perspective on your subject, be consistent and try to maintain it until you have exhausted everything you have to say about the subject. Do not switch: (a) between subjects, or (b) between points of view, or (c) between levels of discourse, or (d) between levels of diction unless you clearly indicate to your reader what you are going to do next. Otherwise, it can be very disorienting for your reader to follow along.

12. Create smooth transitions and logical connections between different ideas and different parts of your argument. Consider whether what you have just said is sufficient information to lead you to your next observation. Linking words like “because,” “since,” “while,” “when,” “as,” “by,” “by means of,” “consequently,” “as a result,” “for this reason,” “through,” “thus,” and “therefore” can be useful for drawing out relationships between ideas. Transitional sentences are necessary for connecting paragraphs. Do not continue your line of argument using demonstrative or personal pronouns (“this,” “that,” “these,” “those,” “it,” “he,” “she,” “they”) unless the antecedent has been well established.

13. Develop your thoughts as if you were answering a series of questions, moving from “what?” to “where and when?” to “who or by whom?” to “how?” and “why?.” First of all, you need to explain what the phenomenon is that you are observing. Then, try to determine under what conditions the phenomenon is taking place and how exactly it manifests itself under these conditions. Decide what agency is involved: who might be controlling or promoting the phenomenon and who might be affected by it. Finally, you need to think about causality: why is the phenomenon taking place at this particular juncture and what purpose or function is it serving? You probably will not be able to answer all of these questions with every assignment you undertake, but you should at least be thinking about them.

14. Consider how what you are saying relates to your overall argument. Some information you may find curious, interesting, or nice to know, but unless it is clearly relevant to the topic you have chosen, do not include it in your paper. You can always save it for another time.

15. Show your reader the different stages of thinking that led you to reach the conclusions you have made. Do not make your reader do the work of drawing connections and conclusions for himself or herself. That is your job.

Prof. James D. Cain

Conclusion

16. Explain why your findings are significant, meaningful, and relevant. Your reader needs to know why it is that what you have discovered is useful and how it might be applicable to other situations. Consider the consequences and implications of your conclusions.

General Instructions

17. Double-space your paper except for indented citations, which should be single-spaced. Use 12-point type with 1-inch margins on every side.

18. Provide a meaningful title for your paper, and include your name in the header or footer of every page.

19. Titles of full texts should be underlined or italicized. Articles or short stories require quotation marks.

20. Number all of your pages.