Writing about Fiction

Brought to you by the Purdue University Online Writing Lab at http://owl.english.purdue.edu.

Also see the OWL handout on Writing about Literature at http://owl.english.purdue.edu/handouts/general/gl_lit.html.

Writing about a story or novel can be difficult because fiction is generally very complex and usually includes several points or themes. To discover these interwoven meanings, you must read the work closely. Below are three techniques for reading fiction actively and critically. Close reading takes more time than quick, superficial reading, but doing a close reading will save you from a lot of frustration and anxiety when you begin to develop your thesis.

Close Reading a Text

Use these "tracking" methods to yield a richer understanding of the text and lay a solid ground work for your thesis.

1. Use a highlighter, but only after you've read for comprehension. The point of highlighting at this stage is to note key passages, phrases, turning points in the story.

    Pitfalls:
    Highlighting too much
    Highlighting without notes in the margins

2. Write marginal notes in the text.

    These should be questions, comments, dialogue with the text itself.
    A paragraph from Doris Lessing's short story "A Woman on a Roof" serves as an example:

    The second paragraph could have a note from the reader like this:

Marginal Notes	Text
Why is the man annoyed by the sunbather? Is Lessing commenting on sexist attitudes?	Then they saw her, between chimneys, about fifty yards away. She lay face down on a brown blanket. They could see the top part of her: black hair, a flushed solid back, arms spread out. "She's stark naked," said Stanley, sounding annoyed.

3. Keep a notebook for freewrite summaries and response entries.

    Write quickly after your reading: ask questions, attempt answers and make comments about whatever catches your attention. A good question to begin with when writing response entries is "What point does the author seem to be making?"

4. Step back.

    After close reading and annotating, can you now make a statement about the story's meaning? Is the author commenting on a certain type of person or situation? What is that comment?

Developing a Thesis

1. Once you've read the story or novel closely, look back over your notes for patterns of questions or ideas that interest you. Have most of your questions been about the characters, how they develop or change?

    For example:
    If you are reading Conrad's The Secret Agent, do you seem to be most interested in what the author has to say about society? Choose a pattern of ideas and express it in the form of a question and an answer such as the following:
    Question: What does Conrad seem to be suggesting about early 20th century London society in his novel The Secret Agent?
    Answer: Conrad suggests that all classes of society are corrupt.

    Pitfalls:
    Choosing too many ideas.
    Choosing an idea without any support.

2. Once you have some general points to focus on, write your possible ideas and answer them.

For example:
Question: How does Conrad develop the idea that all classes of society are corrupt?
Answer: He uses images of beasts and cannibalism whether he's describing socialites, policemen or secret agents.

3. To write your thesis statement, all you have to do is turn the question and answer around. You've already given the answer, now just put it in a sentence (or a couple of sentences) so that the thesis of your paper is clear.

   For example:
   In his novel, <u>The Secret Agent</u>, Conrad uses beast and cannibal imagery to describe the characters and their relationships to each other. This pattern of images suggests that Conrad saw corruption in every level of early twentieth century London society.

4. Now that you're familiar with the story or novel and have developed a thesis statement, you're ready to choose the evidence you'll use to support your thesis. There are a lot of good ways to do this, but all of them depend on a strong thesis for their direction.

   For example:
   Here's a student's thesis about Joseph Conrad's The Secret Agent.

   In his novel, <u>The Secret Agent</u>, Conrad uses beast and cannibal imagery to describe the characters and their relationships to each other. This pattern of images suggests that Conrad saw corruption in every level of early twentieth century London society.

   This thesis focuses on the idea of social corruption and the device of imagery. To support this thesis, you would need to find images of beasts and cannibalism within the text.

Pre-Writing Activities

1. Freewrite

   Without referring to the text or your notes, write for five to ten minutes on all the images (or the device you have chosen to examine) you can recall. This will provide an initial list which will make up your body of evidence.

2. Review

   Look back through the text and your notes to further identify evidence, keeping focused on the particular device you want to discuss.

3. Research

   Optional: Ask your instructor about outside sources before you use them.

   Once you've identified enough textual evidence to support your thesis, you may want to see what other writers have had to say about your topic. This kind of appeal to other authorities helps you back up and interpret your reading of the work.

4. Evaluate

   You will probably generate more evidence than you can use. One way to decide which evidence to take and which to leave is to limit your choices to the best, most illustrative examples you can find. Focus on how the devices are used to develop major characters, major scenes, and major turning points in the work.

Drafting Your Essay

You've read and annotated the work, developed a thesis, and identified your evidence. Now you're ready to work your evidence into your draft. Here are some effective techniques.

1. **Quoting**

● What is a quote?
   Quoting involves taking a word, phrase, or passage directly from the story, novel, or critical essay and working it grammatically into your discussion. Here's an example:

   In his novel, <u>The Secret Agent</u>, Conrad describes Verloc as "undemonstrative and burly in a fat-pig style.... "(69) The pig image suggests that Verloc is not a lean, zealous anarchist, but is actually a corrupt, complacent middle class man who is interested in preserving his comfortable status.

   Notice three things about the example above:

   ○ The passage from the novel is enclosed in quotes and the page number is indicated in parentheses. For more help see our handouts on MLA and APA at
   http://owl.english.purdue.edu/handouts/research/index.html.

   ○ The passage is introduced in a coherent grammatical style; it reads like a complete, correct sentence. For more help, see our handout on using quotation marks at
   http://owl.english.purdue.edu/handouts/grammar/g_quote.html.

   ○ The quote is interpreted, not patched on and left for the reader to figure out what it means.

- When should I quote?

    - To make a particularly important point

    - When a passage or point is particularly well written

    - To include a particularly authoritative source

- How should I quote?

    - All quotes must be introduced, discussed, and woven into the text. As you revise, make sure you don't have two quotes end-to-end.

    - A good rule of thumb: Don't let your quotes exceed 25% of your text.

2. **Paraphrasing**

- What is paraphrasing?
  This is using your own words to say what the author said. To paraphrase the quote used above, you might say something like:

    Conrad describes Verloc as a big man who isn't very expressive and who looks like a pig.

- When should I paraphrase?

    - Paraphrasing is useful in general discussion (introduction or conclusion) or when the author's original style is hard to understand.

    - Again, you would need to interpret the paraphrase just as you would a quote.

    - For more help, see the OWL handout on paraphrasing at http://owl.english.purdue.edu/handouts/research/r_paraphr.html.

3. **Summarizing**

- What is summarizing?
  This is taking larger passages from the original work and summing them up in a sentence or two. To use the example above: Conrad uses pig imagery to describe Verloc's character.

- When should I summarize?

    - Like paraphrasing, summary is useful in general discussion which leads up to a specific point and when you want to introduce the work and present the thesis.

    - For more help, see the OWL handout on Summarizing at http://owl.english.purdue.edu/handouts/research/r_quotprsum.html.

Avoiding Pitfalls

These four common assumptions about writing about fiction interfere with rather than help the writer. Learn to avoid them.

1. Plot Summary Syndrome

Assumes that the main task is simply recalling what happened in detail. Plot summary is just one of the requirements of writing about fiction, not the intended goal.

2. Right Answer Roulette

Assumes that writing about fiction is a "no win" game in which the student writer is forced to try to guess the RIGHT ANSWER that only the professor knows.

3. The "Everything is Subjective" Shuffle

Assumes that ANY interpretation of any literary piece is purely whimsy or personal taste. It ignores the necessity of testing each part of an interpretation against the whole text, as well as the need to validate each idea by reference to specifics from the text or quotations and discussion from the text.

4. The "How Can You Write 500 Words About One Short Story?" Blues

Assumes that writing the paper is only a way of stating the answer rather than an opportunity to explore an idea or explain what your own ideas are and why you have them. This sometimes leads to "padding," repeating the same idea in different words or worse, indiscriminate "expert" quoting: using too many quotes or quotes that are too long with little or no discussion.