
Major Stages in Thinking and Writing About Literature: From Discovering Ideas to Completing the Essay

Finished writing is the sharpened, focused expression of thought and study. It begins with the search for something to say—an idea. Not all ideas are equal; some are better than others, and getting good ideas is an ability that you will develop the more you think and write. As you discover ideas and explain them in words, you will also improve your perceptions and increase your critical faculties.

In addition, because literature itself contains the subject material (though not in a systematic way) of philosophy, religion, psychology, sociology, and politics, learning to analyze literature and to write about it will also improve your capacity to deal with these and other disciplines.

Writing Does Not Come Easily—for Anyone

A major purpose of your being in college, of which your composition and literature course is a vital part, is to develop your capacities to think and to express your thoughts clearly and fully. However, the process of creating a successfully argued essay—the actual process itself of writing—is not automatic. Writing begins in uncertainty and hesitation, and it becomes certain and confident—accomplished—only as a result of great care, applied thought, a certain amount of experimentation, the passage of time, and much effort. When you read complete, polished, well-formed pieces of writing, you might assume, as many of us do, that the writers wrote their successful versions the first time they tried and never needed to make any changes and improvements at all. In an ideal world, perhaps, something like this could happen, but not in this one.

If you could see the early drafts of writing you admire, you would be surprised and startled—and also encouraged—to see that good writers are also human and that what they first write is often uncertain, vague, tangential, tentative, incomplete, and messy. Good writers do not always like their first drafts; nevertheless, they work with their efforts and build upon them. They reconsider their ideas and try to restate them, discard some details, add others, chop paragraphs in half and reassemble the parts elsewhere, throw out much (and then maybe recover some of it), revise or completely rewrite sentences, change words, correct misspellings, sharpen expressions, and add new material to tie all the parts together in a smooth, natural flow.

The Goal of Writing: To Show a Process of Thought

As you approach the task of writing, you should constantly realize that your goal should always be to *explain* the work you are analyzing. You should never be

satisfied simply to restate the events in the work. Too often students fall easily into a pattern of retelling a story or play, or of summarizing the details of a poem. But nothing could be further from what is expected from good writing. **Good writing should be the embodiment of your thought; it should show your thought in action.** Thinking is an active process that does not happen accidentally. Thinking requires that you develop ideas, draw conclusions, exemplify them and support them with details, and connect everything in a coherent manner. Your goal should constantly be to explain the results of your thinking—your ideas, your play of mind over the materials of a work, your insights, your conclusions.

Approach each writing assignment in light of the following objectives: You should consider your reader as a person who has read the work, just as you have done. This person knows what is in the work, and therefore does not need you to restate what she or he already knows. Instead, your reader wants to learn from you what to think about it. Therefore, your task as a writer is always to explain something about the work, to describe the thoughts that you can develop about it. Let us consider again Walker's "Everyday Use." Early in the story we learn that the narrator, Mrs. Johnson, along with her younger daughter, Maggie, is anticipating a visit from her older daughter, Dee. We know this, but if we are reading an essay about the story we will want to learn more from the essay writer. Let us then suppose that a first goal of one of your paragraphs is to explain the uneasiness that Mrs. Johnson feels about her daughter's return. Your paragraph might go as follows:

In the story's first part, Walker establishes that Mrs. Johnson is not totally delighted by her daughter Dee's returning visit. That, in itself, is a surprise, and readers might wonder why she feels this way. Mrs. Johnson's thoughts go back to details about her early life with the daughters. Maggie, the younger child, received burns in a house fire many years before, which Dee escaped. Mrs. Johnson's memory of the fire, when she rescued Maggie only to encounter Dee waiting safely outside, suggests, but only suggests, that Dee might have had something to do with the fire (7). This incident, strong in Mrs. Johnson's mind, however, might explain some of her ambiguous feelings. The same hesitation applies to her memory that Dee as an adolescent was always trying to command, always trying to be No. 1. She had a "scalding humor" (7), even in the family. She also almost literally drove away a boy, Jimmy T, who could not stand Dee's criticism, and who fled to marriage with another young woman (8). It is clear that in these early paragraphs of the story, Walker is providing details that prepare readers for Mrs. Johnson's refusal later on of Dee's request—demand, really—for the two quilts that had been promised to Maggie.

Notice that this paragraph does not simply retell the story's introductory details, but rather refers to the details in order to explain to us, as readers, the causes for Mrs. Johnson's ambiguous feelings about her elder daughter's returning visit. In short, the paragraph illustrates a process of thought involving the story's details and is not a restatement of the narrative. Here is another way in which you might use a thought to connect the same materials:

In the opening paragraphs of "Everyday Use," Walker points out the negative qualities of Dee's character. Dee has always tried to be in command and has the habit of staring people down who might disagree with her. In the judgment of the narrator, Mrs. Johnson,

Dee's mother, Dee has always felt that she held things in the "palm of one hand" (6), and seems to expect that the "world never learned to say no to her" (6). As an adolescent, she had a strongly negative humor that, in her mother's words, was "like bubbles in lye" (8). At a time when Dee was seeing a boy, Jimmy T, she criticized and antagonized him, and he then got married to another young woman whom he would have thought of as being less critical. These details indicate that Dee, who is to appear later in the story and exhibit some of these same qualities, has a strong character, but also has a negative bearing that brings out opposition in others.

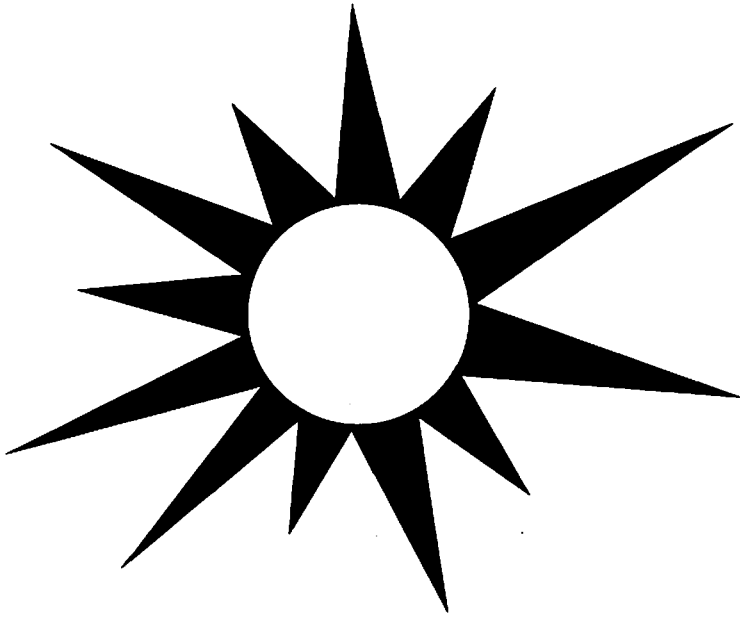
Here the details are not unlike those in the first paragraph, but they are unified by a different idea—namely the difficult and proud traits of the character Dee. What is important is that neither paragraph presents only the details. Instead both paragraphs illustrate the goal of writing with a purpose. Whenever you write, you should always be trying, as in these examples, to use a dominating thought or thoughts to shape the details in the work you are analyzing.

For both practiced and beginning writers alike, there are four stages of thinking and writing, and in each of these there are characteristic activities. In the beginning stage, writers try to find the details and thoughts that seem to be right for eventual inclusion in what they are hoping to write. The second stage is characterized by written drafts, or sketches—ideas, sentences, paragraphs. The third stage of writing encompasses the forming and ordering of what has previously been done—the creation and determination of final paragraphs and a final essay. Although these stages occur in a natural order, they are not separate and distinct, but merge with each other and in effect are fused together. However, when you think you are close to finishing a piece of writing, you may find that you are not as close as you might have thought. You are now in the fourth stage, when you need to finish or complete something else, something more, something different. At this point you can easily re-create an earlier stage to discover new details and ideas. You might say that your writing is always open for change and improvement until you regard it as finished or until you need to turn it in.

Discovering Ideas ("Brainstorming")

With the foregoing general goal in mind, let us assume that you have read the work about which you are to write and have made notes and observations on which you are planning to base your thought. You are now ready to consider and plan what to include in your paragraphs and essays. This earliest stage of writing is unpredictable and somewhat frustrating because you are on a search. You do not know quite what you want, for you are reaching out for ideas and you are not yet sure what they are and what you might say about them. This process of searching and discovery, sometimes also called **brainstorming**, requires you to examine any and every subject that your mind can produce.

Just as you are trying to reach for ideas, however, you also should try to introduce purpose and resolution into your thought. You have to zero in on something specific, and develop your ideas through this process. Although what you write may seem *indefinite*, the best way to help your thinking is to put your mind, figuratively, into specific channels or grooves, and then to confine your thoughts

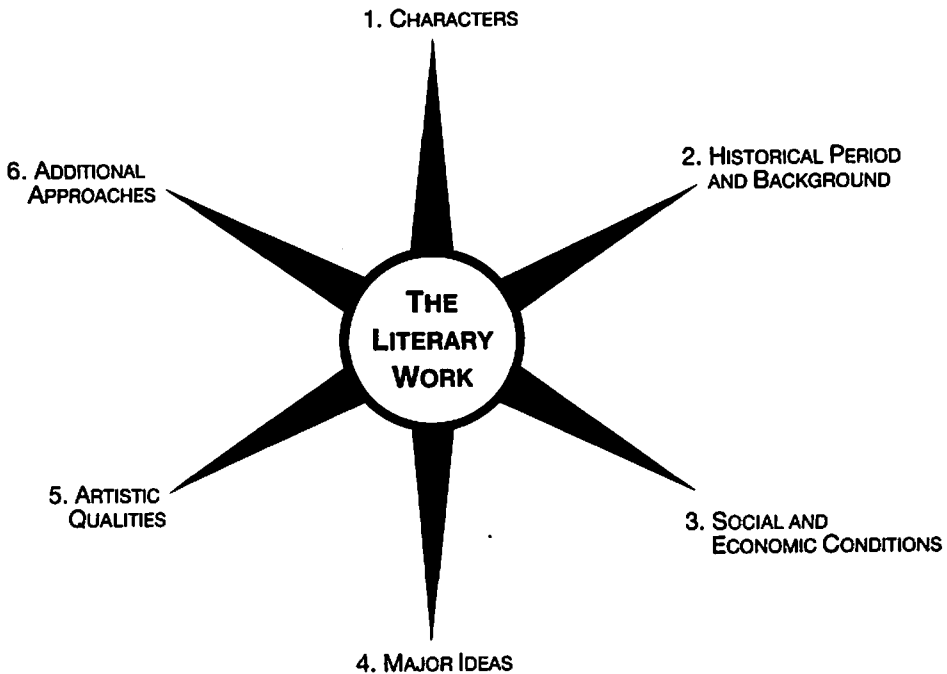


within these boundaries. What matters is to get your mind going on a particular topic and to get your thoughts down on paper or onto a computer screen. Once you can see your thoughts in front of you, you can work with them and develop them. The drawing below can be helpful to you as an illustration of the various facets of a literary work, and it will help you with discovering ways of talking about it.

Consider the work you have read—story, poem, play—as the central circle, from which a number of points, like the rays of a star, shine out, some of them prominently, others less so. These points, or rays, are the various subjects, or topics, that you might decide to select in exploration, discovery, and discussion. Because some elements in a work may be more significant than others, the points are not all equal in size. Notice also that the points grow larger as they get nearer to the work, suggesting that once you select a point of discussion you may amplify that point with details and your own observations about the work.

You can consider literary works in many ways, but for now, as a way of getting started, you might choose to explore (1) the work's characters, (2) its historical period and background, (3) the social and economic conditions it depicts, (4) its major ideas, (5) any of its artistic qualities, or (6) any additional ideas that seem important to you.¹ These topics, of course, have many subtopics, but any one of them can help you in the concentration you will need for beginning your essay (and also for classroom discussion). All you need is one topic, just one; don't try everything at the same time. Let us see how this illustration can be revised to account for these topics. This time the number of points is reduced to illustrate the points or approaches that have just been raised (with an additional and unnamed point to represent all the other

¹Together with additional topics, these critical approaches are discussed in more detail in Chapter 28.



approaches that might be used for other studies). These points represent your ways of discovering ideas about the work.

Study the Characters in the Work

You do not need to be a professional psychologist to discuss the persons or characters that you find in a literary work (see also Chapter 3). You need to raise only issues about the characters and what they do and what they represent. What are the characters like at the beginning of the work? What happens to them? Do they change in any way? What sort of change occurs, such as an alteration of personal condition, or an alteration or modification of an attitude or attitudes? Does the change occur because of what the characters do? Is the change for good or for bad? What brings about the change? For example, in Walker's "Everyday Use," the narrator, Mrs. Johnson, undergoes a shift in her attitudes toward her two daughters. At the beginning, she speaks deferentially about her elder daughter, Dee, and makes apologies about her younger daughter, Maggie. When the story develops to show just how demanding and possessive Dee really is, however, Mrs. Johnson bristles at Dee's demand for the quilts, and refuses to give them up, giving them to Maggie instead. When Dee feels affronted and immediately leaves, it is clear that the relationships between the mother and her daughters have changed.

In discussing character, you might also wish to raise the issue of whether the characters in the work do or do not do what might normally be expected from people in their circumstances. Do they correspond to type? The idea here is that

certain attitudes and behaviors are typical of people at particular stages of life (e.g., children behaving like children, lovers dealing with their relationship, a young couple coping with difficult finances). Thus we might ask questions about whether the usual circumstances experienced by the characters affect them, either by limiting them in some way or by freeing them. What attitudes seem typical of the characters? How do these attitudes govern what the characters do, or do not do? For example, in life, parents typically try to treat their children equally, both when the children are small and dependent, and also when they become adults. Life being what it is, however, along with the literature about it, both real and fictional parents sometimes have favorites among their children. Mrs. Johnson clearly has admired her daughter Dee (or perhaps respected, or treated in awe), but in the course of "Everyday Use" she shifts her favor to her daughter Maggie. One might therefore ask whether Mrs. Johnson's change is logical or illogical—a parental attitude that is within the limits of what we think of as normality.

Determine the Work's Historical Period and Background

An obvious topic is the historical circumstances of the work. When was the work written? How well does it portray details about life at the time it appeared? What is historically unique about it? To what degree does it help you learn something about the past—or the present—that you did not previously know? What actions in the work are like or unlike actions going on at the present time? What truthfulness to life do you discover in the work? "Everyday Use," for example, brings us many details about the life of poor blacks during the time of the Black Power movement following the sit-ins of the 1960s. The story revolves about the differences between a young woman who has accepted the conditions of Black Power and her mother, who has stayed in the rural South and who has also accepted her inequality as a black woman in a dominantly white society. Discussing matters like these might also help you with works written during more recent times, because even the latest assumptions, artifacts, and habits will bear analysis and discussion.

Analyze the Work's Economic and Social Conditions

Closely related to the historical period, and perhaps integral to it, an obvious topic to pursue in many works is the economic and social condition of the characters. To what level of life, economically, do the characters belong? How are events in the work related to their condition? How does their money, or lack of it, limit what they do? How do their economic circumstances either restrict or liberate their imaginations? How do their jobs and their apparent income determine their way of life? If we apply some of these issues to "Everyday Use," we can see that Mrs. Johnson and her daughter Maggie are greatly hindered by their lowly economic status. Mrs. Johnson sustains herself through much hard work more befitting a powerful man. She and Maggie live in Mrs. Johnson's tiny and tin-roofed home. To be comfortable, they go outside, to a yard that is "like an extended living room"

(paragraph 1). They have few, if any, modern conveniences, and instead still actively use many homemade objects in their household. Finally, Mrs. Johnson's lowly social status brings about a consequent acceptance of her political and social inequality as a black woman.

An important part of the economic and social analysis of literature is the consideration of female characters and what it means to be a woman. This is the feminist analysis of literature, which asks questions like these: Generally, how do female literary characters fare because of their sex? To what degree do they conform to gender typing, and to what degree are they able to be free (i.e., Mrs. Johnson does what is normally considered a man's work)? What is their relationship to the men who happen to be a part of their lives? What difficulties are imposed on them as a result of their being women? Contrastingly, what opportunities or benefits do they gain because they are women? What role are female characters able to take as a result of their sex and their family background? To what degree is their imaginative life either enhanced or restricted? Should female characters be considered as an aspect of political arguments for greater freedom for women? Once you start asking questions like these, you will find that your thinking is developing along with your ideas for writing.

The feminist approach to the interpretation of literature has been well established, and it will usually provide you with a way to discuss a work. It is also possible, of course, to analyze what a work says about the condition of being a man, or being a child. Depending on the kind of literature you are reading, many of the questions important in a feminist approach are not dissimilar to those you might use if you are dealing with childhood or with male adulthood.

One of the most important social and economic topics is that of race and ethnicity. What happens in the work that seems to occur mainly because of the race of the characters? Is the author pointing out any deprivations, any absence of opportunity, any oppression? What do the characters do under such circumstances? Do they succeed or not? Are they negative? Are they angry? Are they resolute and determined, as seems to be the outlook of Dee, Mrs. Johnson's elder daughter? Your aim in an inquiry of this type should be to concentrate on actions and ideas in the work that are clearly related to race.

Explain the Work's Major Ideas

One of the major ways of focusing on a work is to zero in on various ideas, or values, or issues to be discovered there. What ideas might we gain from Mrs. Johnson's recollections of her headstrong and self-absorbed daughter Dee? One idea is that when she makes requests from others, it is more important to be considerate than demanding. This is an idea that we might illustrate and expand in an entire essay, not to mention a paragraph. Here are some other ideas that we might also pursue, all of them based on the story's actions.

- Childhood behavior is sometimes carried over into adulthood.
- Too much enthusiasm for a cause often skews one's judgment.
- Adversity may bring out a character's good qualities.
- Many things are to be used for service, not style.

These ideas are all to be found in Walker's "Everyday Use." In other works, of course, we may find similar ideas, in addition to other major ideas and issues.

Describe the Work's Artistic Qualities

A work's artistic qualities provide many possible choices for study, but basically here you might want to consider matters such as (1) the author's narrative method or writing style, and (2) the work's plan or organization. Thus, if we discuss the narrative method of "Everyday Use," we observe that the narrator, Mrs. Johnson, begins her description of Dee with a good deal of detail, but at the same time she provides less detail about Dee's sister Maggie. Thus, at first, the story focuses our attention on Dee, for we learn about Dee's childhood, adolescence, and present appearance and circumstances—no matter how amusing Dee may at first seem. As the story progresses, however, and as the characters interact, Mrs. Johnson tells about Dee more objectively, while at the same time we learn more personal details about Maggie. For this reason we become increasingly sympathetic to Maggie, who emerges as the dominant sister at the story's end, after Dee has departed. Another artistic approach might be to discuss the author's use of chronology in the story. Through Mrs. Johnson's narration, for example, Walker permits us to follow Dee as she sets about to ransack the Johnson family's possessions, especially the chest containing the quilts. We therefore understand Mrs. Johnson's developing disapproval of Dee, if not anger against her, and we also understand her increasing favor toward Maggie. An additional aspect of Walker's artistic skill in the story is her inclusion of symbols to explain the attitudes of Mrs. Johnson. A strong symbol is the earlier house fire, when, we learn, Dee did nothing to help her mother and sister. Another detail that we may understand symbolically is Mrs. Johnson's "rough, man-working hands" (paragraph 5), for she has needed to do heavy labor to make ends meet during her lengthy life as a single mother.

Explain Any Other Approaches That Seem Important

Additional ways of looking at a work might occur to you beyond those just described. One reader might want to deal with some of the comic or humorous parts of a story, such as those in "Everyday Use." One comically presented situation is that Dee makes sure to include the tiny house in all her photographs of the surroundings, along with Mrs. Johnson's responses to this action. Another somewhat comic element is that Mrs. Johnson and Maggie enjoy snuff together at the end of the story. Another reader might want to consider the character of Maggie alone, although she is clearly not the story's major focus. But it is clear that we watch Maggie undergo change as we learn more about her, and this change would be of definite interest. It would also be of interest to track Mrs. Johnson's exact views of Dee, and deal with the problem of whether Dee always put her mother off the way she does in this story—and the implications for the subject of parent-child relationships. The point here is that additional ideas may suggest themselves to you, and that you should keep yourself open to explore and discuss any of these other ways of seeing and thinking.