

Notes on Writing about Literature: A Brief Guide to Better Writing
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Following the Conventions and Other Matters of Form

When you are dealing with literary texts and writing about literature in general, you need to be aware of several important conventions.

- ***Titles of Literary Works:*** Enclose in quotation marks the titles of short works, or anthologized pieces, pieces that are usually published in larger works. The rule of thumb is that you place quotation marks around the titles of short stories, short poems, journal articles, essays, and so forth (for example, “To His Coy Mistress,” “Good Country People”). Short poems or sonnets without titles are identified by first lines without capitalization (for example, “I wandered lonely as a cloud,” “When my love swears that she is made of truth,” and so forth). Longer pieces, or pieces published independently, are underlined or italicized, but not both. These include plays, novels, anthologies, long poems (i.e., The Odyssey, The Iliad, Paradise Lost, Hamlet, and so forth).
- ***Your Titles:*** Make the title of your essay a phrase, not a sentence, and see that it is a clear indication of the contents of your paper. Your titles should be related to the thesis statement. Please do not announce the method that you are following in your title. For example, indicating that your paper is a comparison and contrast, or analysis, or interpretation should not be part of your title. Titles need not be underlined or put into quotation marks. However, the author’s work should be part of your title, properly quoted or italicized. If you have a title and subtitle, separate them with a colon (i.e., **Flannery O’Connor’s “Good Country People”: The Two Faces of Hulga**).

Follow proper rules of capitalization in your own titles without getting confused by the lack of capitalization demanded by the APA style of documentation on your References page. Always capitalize the first and last words of your title and subtitle and all other important words, with the exception of articles, prepositions and conjunctions. Here are some examples:

The Metamorphosis of Sammy in John Updike’s “A & P”

or

Turning the Tables on Time in Andrew Marvell’s “To His Coy Mistress”

Please notice that because all good titles appear in phrase form, there is no period placed after the title. You may, however, use a question mark if part of your title is a question.

- ***Authors' Names:*** As a rule, mention the full name of the author in the beginning of your paper and then refer to him or her by last name only, unaccompanied by Mr. or Mrs.
- ***Using the Present Tense:*** In writing about literature, use the present tense when discussing the characters, their actions, and so forth. Characters do not have a historical past or, for that matter, future. They continuously spring to life each time we read a story, play, or novel. They live in an eternal present. Also use the present tense when referring to the author in the context of his work. Here is the distinction. You may say that "Joyce Carol Oates **wrote** 'Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?' in 1966" because Oates has a historical past. However, you should say, "In the story, Oates **depicts** a young girl on the threshold of awakening sexuality" because you are discussing the author in the context of her work. As a rule, you need to employ the simple present, not the present progressive: "Oates depicts," **not** "Oates is depicting . . ."
- ***Some Matters of Style:*** Do not inject yourself into the paper; that is, try to leave aside all references to yourself. You want your reader to focus on your objective reading of the text, not on you. It will be obvious to your reader that it is you, the writer, who interprets or analyzes the text. Let your interpretation speak for itself without drawing attention to yourself. Above all, do not moralize, preach, or insult the author or read the text through the distorted lens of your own prejudices, whether they be religious, moral, or political. Doing so would render your interpretation subjective at best and may make your reader discount or undervalue your insights.

Also try to avoid the temptation of saying that an author "uses" characters in such or such a way or that a poet "uses" images to do such or such. It is better to say that characters or images "function" one way or another, perhaps to convey an idea or to forward a theme. To say that an author "uses" characters or images imputes a kind of intentionality to authors and you really have no way of knowing what an author intended to do.

- ***Pitfalls in Quoting:*** Think of the author's text as inviolable. When you quote, make sure that you quote precisely without changing or mangling the text. If

you need to interpolate (add or indicate slight changes in the use of capital letters or tense), place square brackets [] around whatever you change. If you omit anything, use three dots, called an ellipsis (. . .).

Often, novice writers think that they are doing a good job in quoting the text when they announce what they are quoting, quote the material, and then tell the reader what they have quoted. Avoid such announcements at all costs. Instead, incorporate your evidence smoothly and seamlessly into your own sentences and never dump into your paper disembodied quotations, that is, quotations that are not properly introduced by or anchored to your own sentences. (Please see the “Using Evidence to Strengthen Your Arguments” and “Making Quotations Fit Grammatically” portions of this document.)