

Essay Outlines & The Claim, Evidence, Commentary Model

The following is an outline for what an essay of literary analysis does. Please use this outline for organizing your essays in class.

1) Introduction Paragraph: where you first tell what the thesis is.

a) Some mention of the title of the work, the author's name, and the genre (drama, novel, poem, etc.) This is often called a T-A-G sentence. When you hand-write an essay in class, underline the title of a novel or play (this indicates it would be italicized in print on a typed essay), and put the title of a poem or short story in quotation marks.

b) A basic summary or "overview" of the work. This is a concise 2-3 sentence description of the work's setting (place and time), storyline, central conflict, main characters, etc. Note: use literary present tense throughout the essay when referring to plot events.

c) A specific statement of your thesis or topic. This must be an expression of your opinion on a debatable issue relating to the work. This is the central assertion you will attempt to prove in your essay. Note: No first-person (I, me, we, etc.) in an essay of literary analysis.

d) A transition sentence leading into the next paragraph.

2) "Body" Paragraphs (Claim, Evidence, Commentary): in which you make a claim that relates to your thesis; cite evidence in the form of specific quotes or passages from the text that relate to the claim; and provide commentary that analyzes the evidence in relation to your thesis.

a) Topic sentence: the first sentence of a body or support paragraph. It identifies one aspect of the major thesis and states a primary reason why the major thesis is true. It is expressed as a claim (assertion).

b) Context for the quote you have chosen, also called "lead-in". For example, who will be quoted, and what is the context in which the character makes the statement you plan to quote? Make sure the claim and quote both relate directly to your thesis.

c) The Quotation itself. When you make an argument about literature, the evidence most valued by your audience is likely to be details of the work itself. Direct quotations from the text are an especially powerful means of indicating that your claims are well grounded. You may also concisely refer to some other specific concrete detail from the story, such as an especially important event or sequence of events. Be very careful not to fall into the trap of simply retelling the story. Assume your reader has read it (I have!).

Also, remember to cite the page and or line reference for each direct quote. Parenthetical citations usually appear after the final quotation mark and before the period, for example: When Bernard invites John to travel to London, John quotes Shakespeare's Miranda from *The Tempest*, and with naïve enthusiasm exclaims, "O brave new world that has such people in it. Let's start at once" (139).

d) Commentary about the quote or concrete detail, also called a warrant, which is an intelligent, tight translation (if necessary) and interpretation of the quote. Be sure to discuss all the ways in which your quote shows something about the claim you make in that body paragraph. Avoid saying, "In this quotation..." or "this quote shows..." You really don't need this. Assume the reader knows you are discussing quotes from the book.

Focus on writing warrants to explain the assumptions that make you think the

information you have given reinforces your case. Remember, quotes don't speak for themselves; if you want a reader to accept a quote as evidence that proves a claim, you must spell out how or why the quote you've selected supports your argument. *(Helpful hint: In your body paragraph, you should have twice as much commentary as concrete detail. In other words, for every sentence of concrete detail, you should have at least two sentences of commentary.*

e) Rinse and repeat. In other words, have a transition sentence after your first "chunk" of Context, Evidence, and Warrant and then offer a second chunk of Context, Evidence, and Warrant. Why? One piece of evidence is not usually sufficient to prove a point, especially if you are trying to establish a pattern.

TRANSITIONS: words or phrases that connect or "hook" one idea to the next, both between and within paragraphs. Transition devices include using connecting words as well as repeating key words or using synonyms. Some examples: Another example... Finally, in the climax...Later in the story... In contrast to this behavior...Not only...but also... Furthermore...

f) Clincher/concluding sentence: last sentence of the body paragraph. It concludes the paragraph by tying the concrete details and commentary back to the major thesis. There will be a number of these "body paragraphs." The trick is to try to make them flow smoothly from one to the other. Also, remember to prioritize which come first, second, etc. Often, chronological ordering works best.

3) Conclusion

a) Some kind of restatement of your thesis, but not a word-for-word repetition from the introduction.

b) A general summary of what, taken all together, your quotes prove about your thesis.

c) A synthesis of the ideas in your quotes. Discuss how they contributed to the meaning and the development of the thesis.

d) Be sure to deal with how the central conflict is resolved and how the book ends, either in your later body paragraphs or in your conclusion. Essays that do not explain how the resolution of the central conflict/end of the book relates to the writer's thesis usually appear underdeveloped.

Claim-Evidence-Commentary (Warrant): A Model for Analyzing Arguments

(adapted from the work of Stephen Toulmin)

Claim

Definition: A claim states your position on the issue you have chosen to write about.

→A good claim is not obvious. Why bother proving a point nobody could disagree with?

→A good claim is engaging. Consider your audience's attention span and make claims which point out new ideas: teach the reader something new.

→A good claim is not overly vague. Attacking enormous issues leads only to generalizations and vague assertions; keep it manageable.

→A good claim is logical; it emerges from a reasonable consideration of the evidence. However, this does not mean that evidence has only one logical interpretation.

Examples:

→Though they seem mere entertainment, Hollywood movies are actually responsible for reinforcing cultural stereotypes in America.

→The most plausible explanation for the recent increase in gambling as an acceptable pastime is the perceived stamp of approval by cultural institutions, such as state and local governments and organized religion.

Evidence

Definition: the evidence or data which you cite to support your claim. Like a lawyer presenting evidence to a jury, you must support your claim with facts; an unsupported claim is merely an assertion.

Data can include:

→Facts or statistics: objectively determined data about your topic. (Note: "objective" may be open to debate.)

→**Expert opinion: Learned opinion, theory, and analysis that you should cite frequently, both to support your argument and to disagree with. Sources must be quoted, paraphrased, and cited appropriately.**

→Primary research: an explanation and discussion of your own research findings and how they relate to your topic.

→Personal anecdotes: the most difficult kind of data to use well because doing so requires a persuasive argument that your own experience is relevant and can be objectively grasped by your reader. Personal experience can, however, bring an argument to life.

Example:

→Last year the State of Minnesota spent \$X million dollars promoting their state-run lottery through ads focusing on the contributions made to environmental funds (Cary).

→ Churches have used raffles, bingo nights, and even card tournaments as fundraisers for years.

Commentary (Warrant)

Definition: the warrant interprets the data and shows how it supports your claim. In other words, the warrant explains why and how the data proves the claim.

→A good warrant will be a reasonable interpretation and analysis of the facts.

→A good warrant will not make illogical interpretive leaps.

→A good warrant will not assume more than the evidence supports.

→A good warrant may consider and respond to possible counter-arguments (refute).

Example:

→Citizens look at the amount of time and effort devoted to promoting gambling-related activities by their government and churches and assume that this is a legitimate and even risk-free activity with little social stigma attached. If the state and church rely on these funds to survive, gambling may even be regarded as a social service: the more money they lose, the more they're helping others.