CHAPTER 43

Writing about Literature

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Writing permits me to experience life as any number of strange creations.

— ALICE WALKER

There's no question about it: writing about literature is a different experience than reading it. Reading, as you no doubt realize by now, is not a passive activity, and yet when we pick up a book, it does feel that someone else has done the hard labor and we're enjoying the fruits of it. Writing is, of course, work, but it is also a pleasure when it goes well — when ideas feel solid and the writing is fluid. You can experience that pleasure as well, if you approach writing as an intellectual and emotional opportunity rather than a chore. When Alice Walker speaks of "strange creations," she's referring to possibilities. Writing allows her to reframe reality, sensation, and perception. This idea does not apply only to fiction, poetry, and drama. The writing you will complete in response to the works in this book also has the capacity to liberate your mind and to demonstrate your intellectual power.

Just as reading literature requires an imaginative, conscious response, so does writing about literature. Composing an essay is not just recording your interpretive response to a work because the act of writing can change your response as you explore, clarify, and discover relationships you hadn't previously considered or recognized. Most writers discover new ideas and connections as they move through the process of rereading and annotating the text, taking notes, generating ideas, developing a thesis, and organizing an argumentative essay. (These activities are detailed later in this chapter.) To become more conscious of the writing process, first consider the ideas we articulate in the sections below, then study the following questions specifically aimed at sharpening your response

to reading and writing about literature. Finally, examine the case studies of students' papers that take you through writing a first response to reading, brainstorming for a paper topic, writing a first draft, revising, and writing the final paper.

WHY AM I BEING ASKED TO DO THIS?

The vast majority of college literature courses require that students write formal essays about the literature they study. You might be wondering why you are being asked to write about literature. You might be in awe of the writers you have read, and you think there is no point trying to write like they do because they are professionals with abundant gifts and talents. Why not allow stories, poems, and plays to speak for themselves? Isn't it presumptuous to interpret Hemingway, Dickinson, or Shakespeare? These writers do, of course, speak for themselves, but they do so indirectly. Literary criticism seeks not to replace the text by explaining it but to enhance our readings of works by calling attention to elements that we might have overlooked or only vaguely sensed.

Your instructor probably isn't asking you to write *like* the authors in this book (although an imitation exercise might be a valuable means to understanding an author's technique), but rather to write *about* them, or, put succinctly, to interpret their work. The questions that follow most of the selections in this anthology are designed to initiate this type of interpretation, and your class discussions extend and complicate such individual interpretations. A formal essay gives you the chance to develop a yet more sophisticated interpretation and to revise it so that it becomes full and persuasive. Through this

process you will work toward mastery of a skill. You'll improve your ability to analyze works of literature and to develop a critical argument that showcases your analysis. But you will also increase your confidence as someone who can communicate clearly and think critically. Those broader competencies will invariably serve you well in social contexts, in your career, and in your quest to become a more impressive human. (Note that the study of literature is part of an academic branch called the *humanities*.)

Composition and rhetoric is a subfield of English that studies the type of writing assigned to you in this course. It is a vast field, and since there have been so many people working in it for so long, there are bound to be disagreements about the best way to teach students to write. You have probably noticed that your teachers from an early age right up through your professors in college have laid down rules that might seem to contradict each other. If your eighth-grade teacher forbade you to use "I" in your formal essays and warned that he would take ten points off your grade if you did so, what do you do in college when your professor encourages you to use "I"? One of your teachers taught you how to perfect the five-paragraph essay and the other asked you in a comment why your essay was only five paragraphs long when you clearly had more to say, especially in paragraph three which was three pages long and contained four paragraphs' worth of ideas. It might be tempting to throw up your hands and to conclude that academic writing is arbitrary, but a critical thinker might instead conclude that writing

is a situational activity, dependent on a series of codes that is always shifting. Your teacher who hammered home the virtues of a five-paragraph essay might have been preparing you to develop into a writer who would realize when five paragraphs were too few, or too many, for the task at hand. Think about the various conventions that shape the writing you already do on a daily basis. What if all of your text messages were as long and as stiff-sounding as the essay you wrote to get into college? (Conversely, where would you be if your college essay resembled any one of your texts?) Strong writers adapt to the various demands of the writing situations they find themselves in. There are a set of conventions for e-mails and office memos and another set of conventions for formal essays assigned in your literature class. This chapter will offer some broad outlines about those conventions, but it can only do so much. Your instructor will invariably want something specific from your writing that we can't anticipate here, and your instructor is your most important audience because he or she is in a position to give you feedback designed to improve your writing.

That last point is crucial. Rhetoric and composition instructors may not agree on all methods instructors use to teach writing, but they all agree on this point: the only way to improve as a writer is to write, to receive feedback on that writing, and to write more, absorbing that feedback while accepting ever more challenging writing assignments. All writers receive feedback, even the ones represented in this book who you might consider to be literary geniuses. Their work is a form of art, but that doesn't mean they

weren't subjected to a lengthy editorial process, or that they didn't show an early draft to a spouse or friend before going public with it. The same might be true for you if you end up in a business setting; you might hear from your boss, "Thanks for the info, Jones, but your e-mails are way too long: cut them in half or no one's going to read them." In this class the feedback you receive from your instructor might critique your writing on multiple levels, from comma usage to the organization of your entire essay. All of this feedback is designed not simply to "correct" your writing, but to help you develop your strength and flexibility as a writer. Writing about literature is a particularly good workout because you are responding to literature, the most sophisticated form of language. The acts of reading and interpreting literature encourage you to pay especially careful attention to the way language works, to its patterns, to its possibilities. Your own writing will invariably improve as you immerse yourself in it.

FROM READING AND DISCUSSION TO WRITING

Introductory literature courses typically include three components — reading, discussion, and writing. Students usually find the readings a pleasure, the class discussions a revelation, and the writing assignments — at least initially — a little intimidating. Writing an analysis of the contrast between darkness and light in James Baldwin's "Sonny's Blues," for example, may seem considerably more daunting than making a case for animal rights or analyzing a campus newspaper editorial that debates the legalization of marijuana. Literary topics are not, however, all that different from the kinds of papers assigned in standard composition courses; many of the same skills are required for both. Regardless of the type of paper you're composing, you must eventually develop a structured argument with a clear thesis and support it with evidence in language that is clear and persuasive. Note the word *eventually*. Writing is a process, sometimes a long and messy one, and with practice you will develop effective strategies to produce drafts that will *eventually* lead to a polished, organized essay. More than anything, writing requires patience and faith in the process.

Whether the subject matter is a marketing survey, a political issue, or a literary work, writing is a method of communicating information and perceptions. Writing teaches. But before writing

becomes an instrument for informing the reader, it serves as a means of learning for the writer. An essay is a process of discovery as well as a record of what has been discovered. One of the chief benefits of writing is that we frequently realize what we want to say only after trying out ideas on a page and seeing our thoughts take shape in language.

In terms of the assignments you will complete for this course, writing about a literary work encourages us to be better readers because it requires a close examination of the elements of a short story, poem, or play. To determine how plot, character, setting, point of view, metaphor, tone, irony, or any number of other literary elements function in a work, we must study them in relation to one another as well as separately. Speed-reading won't do. To read a text accurately and validly — neither ignoring nor distorting significant details — we must return to the work repeatedly to test our responses and interpretations. By paying attention to details and being sensitive to the author's use of language, we develop a clearer understanding of how the work conveys its effects and meanings, and we become literary critics.

Due to the connotations of the word *critical*, a common misunderstanding about the purpose of literary criticism is that it restricts itself to finding faults in a work. Although a critical essay may point out limitations and flaws, most criticism — and certainly the kind of essay usually written in an introductory literature course

— is designed to explain, analyze, and reveal the complexities of a work. Such sensitive consideration increases our appreciation of the writer's achievement and significantly adds to our enjoyment of a short story, poem, or play. In short, the purpose and value of writing about literature are that doing so leads to greater understanding and pleasure.

READING THE WORK CLOSELY

The more familiar you are with how the various elements of the text convey effects and meanings, the more confident you will be explaining your approach to it. Know the piece of literature you are writing about before you begin your essay. Think about how you respond to the work and how it is put together. Relax and enjoy yourself; you can be attentive and still allow the author's words to work their magic on you. With subsequent readings, go more slowly and analytically as you try to establish relations between characters, actions, images, or whatever else seems important. Ask yourself why you respond as you do. Think as you read and notice how the parts of a work contribute to its overall nature. Whether the work is a short story, poem, or play, you will read relevant portions of it over and over, and you will very likely find more to discuss with each rereading if the work is rich.

It's best to avoid reading other critical discussions of a work before you are thoroughly familiar with it. There are several good reasons for following this advice. By reading interpretations before you know a work, you deny yourself the pleasure of discovery. That would be like reading a review of a movie complete with spoilers before watching the movie. But perhaps even more important than protecting the surprise and delight that a work might offer is that a premature reading of a critical discussion will probably short-circuit your own responses. You will see the work through another critic's

eyes and have to struggle with someone else's perceptions and ideas before you can develop your own.

Reading criticism can be useful, but not until you have thought through your own impressions of the text. A guide should not be permitted to become a tyrant. This does not mean, however, that you should avoid background information about a work — for example, knowing that Charlie Parker was an extremely influential and highly regarded jazz musician who died young of a drug overdose is important contextual information for understanding James Baldwin's story "Sonny's Blues." When you come across Parker's name in the story and realize that he was an actual person as opposed to a fictional character, you would be wise to Google it so that you grasp that context. Knowing something about the author as well as historic and literary contexts can help to create expectations that enhance your reading, and the headnotes that precede most of our selections help to provide a little of that information. That type of research is very different from looking up summaries on websites like Sparknotes or Shmoop: those sites tend to do too much of the hard interpretive work for you, and there's no guarantee that their interpretations are better than yours would be, or that they are valid.

You will develop good writing habits over time, and/or you will improve on the good ones you have already developed. Regardless of your specific composition methods, there are three basic phases of

the process to understand: *prewriting, writing,* and *revising*. There is not necessarily a clean break between these phases, though: you might find yourself revising even as you prewrite, for example, or writing more after you've revised your first draft. In general, though, there are distinct principles for these three stages that you should keep in mind as you approach your paper as a series of drafts. What we offer below are some tried-and-true methods: you may have developed others that work better for you, or your instructor might have more specific guidance, but these are also available.

PREWRITING

Annotating the Text and Journal Note Taking

We emphasize the value of critical reading above, and this type of reading is intertwined with prewriting. As you read, get in the habit of annotating your texts. Whether you write marginal notes, highlight, underline, or draw boxes and circles around important words and phrases, you'll eventually develop a system that allows you to retrieve significant ideas and elements from the text. Another way to record your impressions of a work — as with any other experience — is to keep a journal. By writing down your reactions to characters, images, language, actions, and other matters in a reading journal, you can often determine why you like or dislike a work or feel sympathetic or antagonistic to an author or discover paths into a work that might have eluded you if you hadn't preserved your impressions. Your journal notes and annotations may take whatever form you find useful; full sentences and grammatical correctness are not essential (unless your instructor deems them important and requires that you hand them in), though fuller thoughts might allow you to make better sense of your own reflections than incomplete thoughts might. The point is simply to put in writing ideas that you can retrieve when you need them for

class discussion or a writing assignment. Far from making extra work, this process saves you considerable time when you get to the writing phase.

Taking notes will preserve your initial reactions to the work. First impressions are often valid. Your response to a peculiar character in a story, a striking phrase in a poem, or a subtle bit of stage business in a play might lead to larger perceptions. The student paper on ("John Updike's "A & P" as a State of Mind") later in this chapter, for example, began with the student writing "how come?" next to the story's title in her textbook. She thought it strange that the title didn't refer to a character or to the story's conflict. That brief annotated response eventually led her to examine the significance of the setting, which became the central focus of her paper.

Prewriting activities should not interfere with your initial encounter with a text, though: you would do well to keep your pen tucked behind your ear as you first read a text so that you can get a sense of its unique characteristics, its concerns, its possible meaning, or its pleasures and delights. You should take detailed notes only after you've read through the work. If you write too many notes during the first reading, you're likely to disrupt your response. Moreover, until you have a sense of the entire work, it will be difficult to determine how connections can be made among its various elements. In addition to recording your first impressions and noting significant passages, characters, actions, and so on, you should consult the Questions for Responsive Reading and Writing about

fiction, poetry, and drama. These questions can assist you in getting inside a work as well as organizing your notes.

Inevitably, you will take more notes than you finally use in the paper. Note taking is a form of thinking aloud, but because your ideas are on paper (or on a laptop, phone, or tablet), you don't have to worry about forgetting them. As you develop a better sense of a potential topic, your notes will become more focused and detailed.

Choosing a Topic

If your instructor assigns a topic or list of approved topics, some of your work is already completed. Instead of being asked to come up with a topic about *Oedipus the King* (Chapter 36), you may be asked to write a three-page essay that specifically discusses whether Oedipus's downfall is a result of fate or foolish pride. If that is the case, you also have the assurance that a specified topic will be manageable within the suggested number of pages. Unless you ask your instructor for permission to write on a different or related topic, be certain to address yourself to the assignment. There is room even in an assigned topic to develop your own approach. Assigned topics do not relieve you of thinking about an aspect of a work, but they do focus your thinking.

Other assignments might be left open so that you can engage your particular point of view more thoroughly. Before you start considering a topic, you should have a sense of how long the paper will be because the assigned length can help to determine the extent to which you should develop your topic. Ideally, the paper's length should be based on how much space you deem necessary to present your discussion clearly and convincingly, but if you have any doubts and no specific guidelines have been indicated, ask. The question is important; a topic that might be appropriate for a three-page paper could be too narrow for ten pages. Three pages would probably be adequate for a discussion of why Emily murders Homer in Faulkner's "A Rose for Emily." Conversely, it would be futile to try to summarize Faulkner's use of the South as a setting in his fiction in even ten pages; this would have to be narrowed to something like "Images of the South in 'A Rose for Emily.' "

Once you have a firm sense of the scope of what you are expected to write, you can begin to decide on your topic. If you have a choice, it's generally best to write about a topic that you feel strongly about. If you're not fascinated by the rebellious act of tearing wallpaper off a wall in Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper," then perhaps you're more attuned to the murderous revenge that fuels Andre Dubus's "Killings,"or maybe you can explain why the act of destroying a room's décor is so boring to you as an act of defiance. Choose a work that has moved you so that you have something to say about it. The student who wrote "John Updike's A & P as a State of Mind" was initially attracted to the story's title because she had once worked in

a similar store. After reading the story, she became fascinated with its setting because Updike's descriptions seemed so accurate. Her paper then grew out of her curiosity about the setting's purpose. When a writer is engaged in a topic, the paper has a better chance of being interesting to a reader.

After you have settled on a particular work, your notes and annotations of the text should prove useful for generating a topic. The paper on "A & P" developed naturally from the notes the student jotted down about the setting and antagonist. You are likely to find when you review your notes that your thoughts have clustered into one or more topics. Perhaps there are patterns of imagery that seem to make a point about life. There may be scenes that are ironically paired or secondary characters who reveal certain qualities about the protagonist. Your notes and annotations on such aspects can lead you to a particular effect or impression. Having chuckled your way through "A & P," you may discover that your notations about the story's humor point to a serious satire of society's values.

More Focused Prewriting

When you are satisfied that you have something interesting to say about a work and that your notes have led you to a focused topic, you are moving in the direction of formulating a ***thesis statement***, the central idea of the paper. Whereas the topic indicates what the

paper focuses on (the setting in "A & P"), the thesis explains what you have to say about the topic (because the intolerant setting of "A & P" is the antagonist in the story, it is crucial to our understanding of Sammy's decision to quit his job). The thesis is a statement that will probably not fully emerge until the revision stage of your drafting process rather than during prewriting, but you should be aware during prewriting that you are eventually moving in the direction of an *argument*, which is the formal, structured analysis you are building; the thesis is the argument's distilled statement.

An intermediate step between deciding on a topic and formulating a thesis statement is to generate a *working thesis* that will direct your thinking. One simple first step to generate a working thesis about a literary work is to ask the question "why?" Why do these images appear in the poem? Why do the main characters in Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest* lie so much? Why does Hemingway choose the Midwest as the setting of "Soldier's Home"? Your responses to these kinds of questions can lead to a working thesis.

Writers sometimes use *freewriting* to help themselves explore possible answers to such questions. It can be an effective way of generating ideas. Freewriting is nonstop writing without concern for mechanics or editing of any kind. (The equivalent in fiction is *stream of consciousness*.) Freewriting for ten minutes or so on a question will result in fragments and repetitions, but it can also produce some ideas. A freewriting sentence that a student writer might generate in

response to Updike's "A & P" could look like this: "Sammy's job like mine at the Cheesecake Factory both of us wear stupid uniforms and have to deal with obnoxious customers and incompetent bosses but he doesn't get to move around like I do." There's not much in that sentence that would end up in a final draft, especially the personal connection to the character in the story, but the writer is conditioning herself to think about elements of the story that might be relevant: Sammy's uniform and lack of mobility could become important points for analysis.

ARGUING ABOUT LITERATURE

Most writing assignments in a literature course require you to persuade readers that your thesis is reasonable and to support it with evidence. In developing a thesis, you are expected not merely to present information but to argue an interpretive point. An argumentative essay is your interpretation of a work arranged in a persuasive way. Arguing about literature doesn't mean that you're engaged in an angry, antagonistic dispute (though controversial topics do sometimes engender heated debates; see, for example, Joan Templeton's comments in the Critical Case Study on Ibsen's *A Doll's House* [Chapter 39] Instead, argumentation requires that you present your interpretation of a work (or an aspect of it) by supporting your discussion with clearly defined terms, ample evidence, and a detailed analysis of relevant portions of the text.

If your essay is to be interesting and convincing, it is important that you write it from a strong point of view that persuasively argues your evaluation, analysis, and interpretation of a work. Although your response to a text might set you in motion, it is not enough to say that you like or dislike a work; instead you must push beyond that response and give your reader some ideas and evidence that can be accepted or rejected based on the quality of the answers to the questions you raise.

One way to come up with persuasive answers is to generate good questions that will lead you further into the text and to critical issues related to it. Notice how the Perspectives, Critical Case Studies, and Cultural Case Studies in this anthology raise significant questions and issues about texts from a variety of points of view, or contexts. Moreover, the Critical Strategies for Reading summarized in Chapter 42 can be a resource for raising questions that can be shaped into an argument.

WRITING

Writing a First Draft

Writing is a process, as we have said, but it is not the same process for every writer. You may be the type of writer who needs a formal outline with headings and subheadings before you can begin a draft, or you may find such methods constraining. Whether you have started with freewriting, outlining, or some other prewriting method, you should have some sense of how your paper will be organized — or at least, what you need to cover — as you write your first draft. The working thesis you generate during prewriting, even if it is still somewhat tentative, should help you decide what information will need to be included and provide you with a sense of direction.

At this stage it is crucial to be flexible rather than to adhere too closely to whatever methods you used during the prewriting stage. By using the first draft as a means of thinking about what you want to say, you will very likely discover more than your notes originally suggested. Once again, writing is a process, and computers have made it easy to generate words without making a lifetime commitment to them. You do not need to get bogged down with sentence-level perfection at this early stage. Concentrate on what

you are saying. Good writing most often occurs when you are in hot pursuit of an idea rather than in a nervous search for errors. You can improve on each draft paragraph by paragraph, sentence by sentence, and even word by word, but at this stage you should give yourself permission to generate the raw material you will eventually shape into something coherent and eloquent.

Once you have a first draft on your computer, you can delete material that is unrelated to your working thesis and add material necessary to illustrate your points and make your paper convincing. (Some writers find it useful to create a separate file of deleted items that they may want to resurrect at a later stage.) The student who wrote "John Updike's A & P as a State of Mind" wisely dropped a paragraph that questioned whether Sammy displays chauvinistic attitudes toward women. Although this is an interesting issue, it has nothing to do with her argument and eventual thesis, which explains how the setting influences Sammy's decision to quit his job. Instead of including that paragraph, she added one that described Lengel's crabbed response to the girls so that she could lead up to the A & P "policy" he enforces.

Textual Evidence: Using Quotations, Summarizing, and Paraphrasing

We have been referring to your essay as an "argument," and we have tried to make it clear that you are not necessarily disagreeing with someone's interpretation. You might think of your role more as building a courtroom case. In order to do so, you have to stick to provable facts, or evidence. Each academic discipline approaches evidence slightly differently, but all of them require it. In your chemistry class, evidence might take the form of the results of lab work; in history, you might have to produce a primary document to argue, for instance, that a certain party was responsible for catalyzing a certain war. In the study of literature, the hardest evidence you have access to is a direct quotation from the text. Examining the language of a text is the best way to show that you are immersed in it, and that you are willing to look at it closely.

And yet, there are times when you might find it useful to broadly summarize a work of literature, or even to paraphrase segments of it. As an analogy, imagine a work of literature as a forest. Think of how different that forest would appear if you were (1) flying over it in a helicopter, or (2) strolling through it, or (3) kneeling down with a magnifying glass to examine an ant colony in a rotting stump. The third encounter with the forest provides the most substantial evidence, like the quotation from a work of literature, but you are not in a position to describe the entire forest from that vantage point. You want to develop a sense of when each perspective might be most useful.

As you are introducing the primary text you are analyzing, you would do well to provide a bit of summary to orient the reader — the helicopter perspective in our analogy above. It might be jarring to provide direct evidence in the form of a quotation without any summary. Imagine a paper that starts like this: "Sammy says, 'She had sort of oaky hair that the sun and salt had bleached.' " That might be useful information to the author's argument, but the reader is likely to wonder, for starters, "Who is Sammy?" It might be more advantageous to think about an accurate summary of the story that also introduces your topic, like this sentence: "John Updike's 'A & P' is a story about Sammy, a teenaged grocery store clerk who is so upset by the way his boss treats three female customers that he quits his job." That's an accurate summary of the story's main plot, but it may or may not be detailed enough for your purposes. Do you need Sammy's boss's name in this summary? The age of the three female customers is not specified; should it be? Do we need to know that it is a story written from the first-person point of view? Does the fact that Sammy is keenly aware of class differences between himself and "Queenie" and the other girls matter enough to mention it in the summary?

These questions are a way of pointing out that summaries actually involve interpretation. If you and your classmates were all to summarize any work of literature you have read this semester, even if all of them are technically accurate and factual, what chance would there be that any two of them would be worded exactly the same way? Think of a summary, then, as a necessary way to frame

your analysis, but also as an opportunity to begin to focus in on your perspective or context. Let's say you are writing about gender discrimination in "A & P." Your one-sentence summary might look like this: "John Updike's 'A & P' is the story of three teenaged girls who are shamed by a grocery store manager for dressing in a supposedly inappropriate manner." This is also an accurate summary of the story, and Sammy is nowhere in sight. He will probably become part of the author's argument, but this author's initial focus is clearly on the way the girls are treated rather than on Sammy's reaction to that treatment. When you summarize, you are making decisions, sometimes unconsciously, about how you have read and understood a text. You will gradually develop a sense of how much summary you need to make your point. We can distinguish between necessary and unnecessary summary in the abstract, but there is no firm rule dividing these categories. The examples above are one-sentence summaries. Depending on the length of your essay, the difficulty and length of the text under consideration, and a number of other factors, you might decide you need a fuller summary to situate the reader. Imagine that reader as someone who is familiar with the work you are writing about, but who needs a little reminder about it. That reader is not in your head, but he or she is also not someone who has never read a work of literature: you probably wouldn't need to say, "John Updike was an author (which is a name for someone who writes for a living) of a short story (which is a literary prose genre of imaginative writing that combines such elements as character, plot, theme, and imagery to form a certain effect on the reader) titled 'A & P' about Sammy

(which is a nickname for Samuel . . .)." We're being a little facetious here, but hopefully you get the point: a summary can swell or shrink according to your needs. You are the author, and you are in control of its level of detail. Just make sure it is accurate: if you were to say, "John Updike's 'A & P' is a story set in Malaysia in the 1980s," you would be writing fiction rather than summarizing it.

Paraphrase is related to summary, but it tends to be focused more narrowly. The common understanding of paraphrasing is restatement, usually concise restatement. You'll want to make sure to paraphrase in a way that is both accurate and that does not risk triteness. Take Hamlet's famous "To be, or not to be" soliloquy. You could paraphrase it this way: "Hamlet is basically saying, 'You only live once, so go for it.' " To do so would be to significantly cheapen one of the more nuanced speeches in literature, though, and to reduce it to a pair of clichés. Like summary, paraphrase is an opportunity to interpret and frame a segment of the literary work you are analyzing. This segment might be important to your essay, but you might not need to spend as much time on it as you would spend on the passages, lines, or sentences that are really crucial to your argument. That's where the analysis of direct quotations comes in.

Quotations can be a valuable means of marshaling evidence to illustrate and support your ideas. A strategic use of quoted material will make your points clearer and more convincing. A key component to the use of direct quotation, though, is that you are

charged with *working with* the language of the text. Some developing writers assume that placing a quotation in an essay is the final step, but it is really the first step. You can't expect these quotations to speak for themselves: again, you are in the business of interpreting them. You might even have to break down a quotation into smaller units, calling attention to individual words or phrases in order to look at them carefully. Imagine the essay we describe above in which the author is writing about gender discrimination in Updike's "A & P." The author might say, "A significant sentence is this one: 'Queenie's blush is no sunburn now, and the plump one in plaid, that I liked better from the back — a really sweet can — pipes up, 'We weren't doing any shopping.' " If the author moves on to the next point from there and leaves it at "significant," the reader is likely to ask, "What's significant about it?" Imagine the analysis that could and should follow this incorporated quotation, something like this: "It is important to note not only that Sammy is focused on the girls' bodies, from Queenie's blush to what he deems the most attractive features of the nameless 'plump one in plaid,' but also that he is as guilty as Lengel is of treating them like objects. The rear end of the 'plump one' becomes a commodity like anything else in the grocery store, a crassly-described 'can.' In this way Sammy demonstrates how conditioned he has become by the materialistic sexist society he lives in." The quotation only becomes evidence when it is closely examined.

Here are some guidelines that should help you incorporate quotations effectively.

1. It is possible for you to include quotations at the beginning or the end of a paragraph, but we would recommend that you attempt to include them in the middle of a paragraph. The basic reason is that each paragraph is an idea-unit that helps you to further your argument; therefore, it's best to have your voice at the beginning and end of each paragraph. This method allows you to introduce the point you are making or claim you are stating, then to include the quotation in order to illustrate that point, and finally to interpret the language of the quotation as we demonstrate above.
2. Brief quotations (four lines or fewer of prose or three lines or fewer of poetry) should be carefully introduced and integrated into the text of your paper with quotation marks around them:

> According to the narrator, Bertha "had a reputation for strictness." He tells us that she always "wore dark clothes, dressed her hair simply, and expected contrition and obedience from her pupils."

For brief poetry quotations, use a slash to indicate a division between lines:

> The concluding lines of Blake's "The Tyger" pose a disturbing question: "What immortal hand or eye / Dare frame thy fearful symmetry?"

Lengthy quotations should be separated from the text of your paper. More than three lines of poetry or more than four lines of prose should be double spaced and indented one inch from the left margin, with the right margin the same as for the text. If you are quoting something of this length (called "block quotation format"), do *not* use quotation marks for the passage; the indentation indicates that the passage is a quotation. Lengthy quotations should not be used in place of your own writing. Use them only if an extended reproduction of the work's language is absolutely necessary.

3. If any words are added to a quotation, use brackets to distinguish your addition from the original source:

    > "He [Young Goodman Brown] is portrayed as self-righteous and disillusioned."

    Any words inside quotation marks and not in brackets must be precisely those of the author. Brackets can also be used to change the grammatical structure of a quotation so that it fits into your sentence:

    > Smith argues that Chekhov "present[s] the narrator in an ambivalent light."

    If you drop any words from the source, use ellipses to indicate the omission:

    > "Early to bed … makes a man healthy, wealthy, and wise."

Use a single line of spaced periods to indicate the omission of a line or more of poetry or more than one paragraph of prose:

> Nothing would sleep in that cellar, dank as a ditch,
>
> Bulbs broke out of boxes hunting for chinks in the dark,
>
> . . . . . .
>
> Nothing would give up life:
>
> Even the dirt kept breathing a small breath.

4. You will be able to punctuate quoted material accurately and confidently if you observe these conventions.

   Place commas and periods inside quotation marks:

   > "Even the dirt," Roethke insists, "kept breathing a small breath."

   Even though a comma does not appear after "dirt" in the original quotation, it is placed inside the quotation mark. The exception to this rule occurs when a parenthetical reference to a source follows the quotation:

   > "Even the dirt," Roethke insists, "kept breathing a small breath" (11).

Punctuation marks other than commas or periods go outside the quotation marks unless they are part of the material quoted:

> What does Roethke mean when he writes that "the dirt kept breathing a small breath"?
>
> Yeats asked, "How can we know the dancer from the dance?"

> In the first quotation, there is no question mark in Roethke's original poem; in the second quotation, there is a question mark in Yeats's poem.

There is no formula about when to summarize, paraphrase, or analyze direct quotations as evidence. All three methods, though, are ways to demonstrate your engagement with the primary text. The body of your argument is based on this engagement. Consider these methods as different tools in your toolbox, each of which is designed for a different job. With practice, you'll develop a sense of proportion that will become almost instinctive, but as you start out it is good to be aware of everything you can use and to be conscious of your decisions. Feedback from readers is one of the best ways to fine-tune those decisions.

Writing the Introduction and Conclusion

After you have clearly and adequately developed the body of your paper, pay particular attention to the introductory and concluding paragraphs. It's not a bad idea to write the introduction — at least the final version of it — last, after you know precisely what you are introducing, though some writers are not comfortable composing their argument until they have an introduction in place. Regardless of when you write your introductory paragraph during the writing progress, be aware of the special status of the introduction and the conclusion. Because the introductory paragraph is crucial for generating interest in the topic, it should engage the reader and provide a sense of what the paper is about. There is no formula for writing effective introductory paragraphs because each writing situation is different — depending on the audience, topic, and approach — but if you pay attention to the introductions of the essays you read (including the student examples throughout this book), you will notice the way introductions provide focus. The introductory paragraph to "John Updike's A & P as a State of Mind" for example, is a straightforward explanation of why the story's setting is important for understanding Updike's treatment of the antagonist. The rest of the paper then offers evidence to support this point.

The general expectation for an academic analytical essay is that the *thesis statement* will make its appearance at the end of the introductory paragraph. We mentioned the working thesis earlier when we discussed prewriting. Through the writing process it will evolve into the thesis statement, which is the aspect of your paper that will be scrutinized the most, and yet less experienced writers are often confused about what it is. As you move toward completing your first full draft, scrutinize your working thesis carefully and work patiently to make sure it covers the breadth of your argument. There are many burdens on the thesis: it should be a complete sentence (though sometimes it may require more than one sentence) that establishes your interpretation of a text in clear, unambiguous language. It is more than a statement of your topic: it also involves your approach to that topic, the interpretation that emerges from that approach, and the *conclusion* to your argument. We'll restate that point because it's crucial, and because it might seem paradoxical: *even though it appears in your introduction, the thesis is a kind of conclusion*. Many readers lose patience with a statement like this one in place of a true thesis: "In this paper I will examine Wilde's use of puns in *The Importance of Being Earnest*." That is the promise of a thesis: stay tuned for my thesis, which will show up at some point over the next five pages! Your reader will invariably reply, "What did you learn when you examined that text?" The answer to that question is closer to your true thesis, which might look like this: "Puns in *The Importance of Being Earnest*, far more than a cheap form of humor, intensify the play's concerns with the

instability of identity and the hypocritical nature of many revered social conventions." Now we know where we're going. The thesis may be revised as you get further into the topic and discover what you want to say about it, but once the thesis is established, it will serve as a guide for you and your reader.

Concluding paragraphs also demand special attention because they leave the reader with a final impression of the author's confidence, authority, and intellectual passion. The conclusion should provide a sense of closure instead of starting a new topic or ending abruptly. In the final paragraph about the significance of the setting in "A & P," the student brings together the reasons Sammy quit his job by referring to his refusal to accept Lengel's store policies. Simultaneously, she also explains the significance of Sammy ringing up the "No Sale" mentioned in her introductory paragraph. Thus, we are brought back to where we began, but we now have a greater understanding of why Sammy quits his job. Though they have something in common, the introduction and conclusion of a paper are not exactly the same: the conclusion reflects the journey that has taken place between them. Of course, the body of your paper is the substance of your presentation, but first and last impressions have a powerful impact on readers.

REVISING AND EDITING

College students are sometimes known for procrastination and other, shall we say, emerging time management skills, but we urge you to be kind to yourself (and to your instructor) by following a drafting schedule that is not so hectic. Put some distance — a day or so if you can — between yourself and each draft of your paper. The phrase that seemed just right on Wednesday may appear all wrong on Friday. You'll have a better chance of detecting lumbering sentences and thin paragraphs if you plan ahead and give yourself the time to read your paper from a fresh perspective. Through the process of revision, you can transform a competent paper into an excellent one.

Begin by asking yourself if your approach to the topic requires any rethinking. One strategy is to identify the most interesting point in your essay. (If you can't find an interesting point, you have some work to do.) One of the most common issues for writers at your stage of development is not believing in your ability to generate a good, original idea. The consequence of this circumstance is usually that the writer begins to say something interesting, then immediately pulls back, like checking your swing in baseball. Readers would rather see you follow through with those ideas or develop them by delving deeper into the text. There is always room for development, and you would do well to create space for that development by

deleting the parts of the argument that are not relevant to the thesis. This is often the most difficult aspect of writing, especially if you are overly focused on the number of words or pages specified in the assignment. You are likely to want to hold onto the words you have generated, but if they are not the best words to develop your thesis, they are not as valuable as you imagine them to be. Now that you have a draft in place, though, you have more freedom to concentrate on developing the important ideas and diminishing the parts of your paper that might be weighing it down.

If your thesis fails to capture what you've identified as the most interesting point in your paper, you should see an opportunity to revise. It is possible to revise your paper in order to conform to your uninteresting thesis, but it is preferable (and ultimately easier) to change your thesis to accommodate the paper's most important analysis. The thesis is meant to be malleable. Recall that we emphasized the word *eventually* when we introduced the idea of the thesis above. Your entire paper will change with each draft, and your thesis is especially susceptible to change.

The following checklist offers questions to ask about your paper as you revise and edit it. Most of these questions will be familiar to you; however, if you need help with any of them, ask your instructor or review the appropriate section in a composition handbook.

Questions for Writing: A Revision Checklist

1. Is the topic manageable? Is it too narrow or too broad?
2. Is the thesis clear? Is it based on a careful reading of the work and on your smartest, most passionate idea in response to that work?
3. Is the paper logically organized? Does it have a firm sense of direction?
4. Is your argument persuasive? Could anyone dispute it? (Note that if an argument is *completely* indisputable, that might mean that you aren't really saying anything interpretive.)
5. Should any material be deleted? Do any important points require further illustration or evidence?
6. Does the opening paragraph introduce the topic in an interesting manner indicating a context or critical framework that leads to your thesis?
7. Is each paragraph developed, unified, and coherent? Are any notably short or long? If so, do they truly represent a single idea-unit or should they be broken up and/or combined with the paragraphs around them?
8. Are there transitions linking the paragraphs? (This question is directly related to question #3 about organization.)
9. Does the concluding paragraph provide a sense of closure?
10. Is the tone appropriate for an academic essay? Is it, for example, flippant or pretentious?
11. Is the title engaging and suggestive?
12. Is every sentence clear, concise, and complete?
13. Are simple, complex, and compound sentences used for variety?
14. Have technical terms been used correctly? Are you certain of the meanings of all the words in the paper? Are they spelled correctly?
15. Have you documented any information borrowed from books, articles, or other sources? Have you achieved your desired balance between quoting, summarizing, and paraphrasing secondary material?
16. Have you used a standard format for citing sources (see Chapter 44)?
17. Have you followed your instructor's guidelines for the manuscript format of the final draft?
18. Have you carefully proofread the final draft?

TYPES OF WRITING ASSIGNMENTS

The term we've been using for your approach to literature — interpretation — is broad. Your instructor may be looking for different types of interpretive skills or rhetorical strategies in different assignments, so it's worthwhile to scrutinize each assignment for keywords that help you understand the intent. Three types of papers frequently assigned in literature classes are explication, analysis, and comparison and contrast. Most writing about literature involves some combination of these skills. This section includes a sample explication, an analysis, and a comparison and contrast paper. For a sample research paper that demonstrates a variety of strategies for documenting outside sources, see Chapter 44. For genre-based assignments, see the sample papers for writing about fiction, poetry, and drama.

Explication

The purpose of this approach to a literary work is to make the implicit explicit. *Explication* is a detailed explanation of a passage of poetry or prose. Because explication is an intensive examination of a text line by line, it is mostly used to interpret a short poem in its entirety or a brief passage from a long poem, short story, or play. Explication can be used in any kind of paper when you want to be

specific about how a writer achieves a certain effect. An explication pays careful attention to language — the connotations of words, allusions, figurative language, irony, symbol, rhythm, sound, and so on. These elements are examined in relation to one another and to the overall effect and meaning of the work.

The simplest way to organize an explication is to move through the passage line by line, explaining whatever seems significant, but this approach can diminish your interpretation because it attributes equal significance to every word, line, or element of a poem. It is wise to avoid an assembly-line approach that begins each sentence with "In line one (two, three) … ." Instead, organize your paper to best serve your thesis. You might find that the right place to start is with the final lines, working your way back to the beginning of the poem or passage while still paying careful attention to each line and to all components. The following sample explication on Dickinson's "There's a certain Slant of light" does just that. The student's opening paragraph refers to the final line of the poem in order to present her thesis. She explains that though the poem begins with an image of light, it is not a bright or cheery poem but one concerned with "the look of Death." Since the last line prompted her thesis, that is where she begins the explication.

You might also find it useful to structure a paper by discussing various elements of literature, so that you have a paragraph on connotative words followed by one on figurative language and so on. However your paper is organized, keep in mind that the aim of an

explication is not simply to summarize the passage or work but to comment on the effects and meanings produced by the author's use of language in it. An effective explication (the Latin word *explicare* means "to unfold") displays a text to reveal how it works and what it signifies. Although writing an explication requires some patience and sensitivity, it is an excellent method for coming to understand and appreciate the elements and qualities that constitute literary art.

Analysis

The preceding sample essay shows how an explication examines in detail the important elements in a work and relates them to the

whole. An analysis, however, usually examines only a single element — such as plot, character, point of view, symbol, tone, or irony — and relates it to the entire work. An analytic topic separates the work into parts and focuses on a specific one; you might consider "Point of View in 'A Rose for Emily,' " "Patterns of Rhythm in Browning's 'My Last Duchess,' " or "Sound and Vision in *How I Learned to Drive*." The specific element must be related to the work as a whole or it will appear irrelevant. It is not enough to point out that there are many death images in Andrew Marvell's "To His Coy Mistress" and to list them; the images must be shown to produce the poem's overall effect.

Whether an analytic paper is just a few pages or many, it cannot attempt to discuss everything about the work it is considering. Only those elements that are relevant to the topic should be treated. This kind of focusing makes the topic manageable; this is why most papers that you write will probably be some form of analysis. Explications are useful for a short passage, but a line-by-line commentary on a story, play, or long poem simply isn't practical. Because analysis allows you to consider a significant effect or meaning of an entire work by studying a single important element, it is a useful and common approach to longer works.

Comparison and Contrast

Another interpretive essay assignment in literature courses requires you to write about similarities and differences between or within works. You might be asked to discuss "How Sounds Express Meanings in John Updike's 'Player Piano' and Lewis Carroll's 'Jabberwocky,' " or "Sammy's and Stokesie's Attitudes about Conformity in Updike's 'A & P.' " A *comparison* of either topic would emphasize their similarities, while a *contrast* would stress their differences. It is possible, of course, to include both perspectives in a paper if you find significant likenesses and differences. A

comparison of Andrew Marvell's "To His Coy Mistress" and Ann Lauinger's "Marvell Noir" would, for example, yield similarities because each poem describes a man urging his lover to make the most of their precious time together; however, important differences also exist in the tone and theme of each poem that would constitute a contrast. (You should, incidentally, be aware that the term *comparison* is sometimes used inclusively to refer to both similarities and differences. If you are assigned a comparison of two works, be sure that you understand what your instructor's expectations are; you may be required to include both approaches in the essay.) As we have stressed in other contexts, the desired outcome of this type of approach is not simply to point out similarities or differences, but to use them in order to advance an original interpretation.

When you choose your own topic, the paper will be more successful — more manageable — if you write on works that can be meaningfully related to each other. Although Robert Herrick's "To the Virgins, to Make Much of Time" and Shakespeare's *Hamlet* both have something to do with hesitation, the likelihood of anyone making a connection between the two that reveals something interesting and important is remote — though perhaps not impossible if the topic were conceived imaginatively and tactfully. That is not to say that comparisons of works from different genres should be avoided, but the relation between them should be strong, as would a treatment of African American masculine identity in

Ralph Ellison's story "King of the Bingo Game" and August Wilson's play *Fences*. Choose a topic that encourages you to ask significant questions about each work; the purpose of a comparison or contrast is to understand the works more clearly for having examined them together. Despite the obvious differences between Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House* and David Long's "Morphine," the two are closely related if we ask why each protagonist withdraws from his or her family.

Choose works to compare or contrast that intersect with each other in some significant way. They may, for example, be written by the same author, in the same genre, around the same time period, or about the same subject. Perhaps you can compare their use of some technique, such as irony or point of view. Regardless of the specific topic, your approach should allow you to organize your paper around a central idea that argues a point about the two works. Keep in the foreground of your thinking what the comparison or contrast reveals about the works.

There is no single way to organize comparative papers since each topic is likely to have its own particular issues to resolve, but it is useful to be aware of two basic patterns that can be helpful with a comparison, a contrast, or a combination of both. One method that can be effective for relatively short papers consists of dividing the paper in half, first discussing one work and then the other. Here, for example, is a partial informal outline for a discussion of Sophocles' *Oedipus the King* (Chapter 36) and Shakespeare's *Othello* (Chapter 37);

the topic is a comparison and contrast: "Oedipus and *Othello* as Tragic Figures."

1. Oedipus

    a. The nature of the conflict

    b. Strengths and stature

    c. Weaknesses and mistakes

    d. What is learned

2. Othello

    a. The nature of the conflict

    b. Strengths and stature

    c. Weaknesses and mistakes

    d. What is learned

This organizational strategy can be effective provided that the second part of the paper combines the discussion of *Othello* with references to Oedipus so that the thesis is made clear and the paper unified without being repetitive. If the two characters were treated entirely separately, then the discussion would be merely parallel rather than integrated. In a lengthy paper, this organization

probably would not work well because a reader would have difficulty remembering the points made in the first half as he or she reads on.

Thus, for a longer paper it is usually better to create a more integrated structure that discusses both works as you take up each item in your outline. Here is the second basic pattern using the elements in the partial outline just cited:

1. The nature of the conflict
    a. Oedipus
    b. Othello
2. Strengths and stature
    a. Oedipus
    b. Othello
3. Weaknesses and mistakes
    a. Oedipus
    b. Othello
4. What is learned
    a. Oedipus
    b. Othello

This pattern allows you to discuss any number of topics without requiring that your reader recall what you first said about the conflict Oedipus confronts before you discuss Othello's conflicts fifteen pages later. However you structure your comparison or contrast paper, make certain that a reader can follow its elements and keep track of its thesis.

WRITING ABOUT FICTION, POETRY, AND DRAMA

Writing about each of the genres of imaginative literature that comprise this book involves a series of closely related but significantly different sets of conventions. Even the way we refer to the different genres involves a slightly different vocabulary. For example, the person who tells the story in a work of short fiction is a narrator, but that voice in a poem is a speaker. In poetry we cite lines while in plays we often refer to acts and scenes. A character in a play or story might become a persona in a poem, and so forth. Although the three genres share certain elements — you can find metaphors in plays, stories, and poems — the emphasis is likely to be different. With these differences in mind, we have included sections below that apply the principles of writing about literature in general to each genre specifically.

WRITING ABOUT FICTION

Writing about fiction is sometimes less intimidating to students than writing about poetry or drama, but it comes with a unique set of challenges. First and foremost, stories center around plots that tend to bewitch the reader and to obscure the story's other elements. You might find yourself recalling a story by saying, "Oh, that's the one about the guy who works in the grocery store," but as you know, plot is only one element. Most poems are only a page or two long, meaning you can see them all at once and visually compare their elements, whereas fiction tests your power of memory. Plays consist mostly of dialogue, whereas fiction tends to intersperse dialogue and description, sometimes demanding that your imagination make great leaps over time and space. In short, fiction often creates its own world, and its expansiveness is sometimes hard to gather in.

Given the fact that fiction tends to swell over time and space and focuses on the endlessly fascinating subject of human behavior, it is probably best to begin broadly and work toward narrowing down your topic. In writing about poetry, you might start with a single feature of language, like rhythm; in writing about fiction, you will probably be drawn initially toward a character. Fiction offers a wider variety of entry points. We'd suggest that you try to determine what you find unique, fascinating, noteworthy, or perhaps just recognizable within a given story as a way of figuring out where you want to begin.

Questions for Responsive Reading and Writing about Fiction

The following questions can help you consider important elements of fiction that reveal your responses to a story's effects and meanings. The questions are general, so they will not always be relevant to a particular story. Many of them, however, should prove useful for thinking, talking, and writing about a work of fiction. Note that these are just initial ways of approaching a story as a way of generating ideas: you will probably end up combining elements or developing a context that will expand your sense of how to frame one or more of them. If you are uncertain about the meaning of a term used in a question, consult the Glossary of Literary Terms. You should also find useful the discussion of various critical approaches to literature and possible contexts in Chapter 42, "Critical Strategies for Reading."

Plot

1. Does the plot conform to a formula? Is it like those of any other stories you have read? Did you find it predictable?
2. What is the source and nature of the conflict for the protagonist? Was your major interest in the story based on what happens next or on some other concern? What does the title reveal now that you've finished the story?
3. Is the story told chronologically? If not, in what order are its events told, and what is the effect of that order on your response to the action?
4. What does the exposition reveal? Does the author employ flashbacks? Did you see any foreshadowing? Where is the climax?
5. Is the conflict resolved at the end? Would you characterize the ending as happy, unhappy, or somewhere in between?
6. Is the plot unified? How is each incident somehow related to some other element in the story?

Character

1. Do you identify with the protagonist? Who (or what) is the antagonist?
2. Did your response to any characters change as you read? What do you think caused the change? Do any characters change and develop in the course of the story? How?

3. Are round, flat, or stock characters used? Is their behavior motivated and plausible?
4. How does the author reveal characters? Are they directly described or indirectly presented through gestures, dialogue, interior monologue, etc.?
5. What is the purpose of the minor characters? Are they individualized, or do they primarily represent ideas or attitudes?

Setting

1. Is the setting important in shaping your response? If it were changed, would your response to the story's action and meaning be significantly different?
2. Is the setting used symbolically? Are the time, place, and atmosphere related to the theme?
3. Is the setting used as an antagonist?

Point of View

1. Who tells the story? Is it a first-person or third-person narrator? Is it a major or minor character or one who does not participate in the action at all? How much does the narrator know? Does the point of view change at all in the course of the story?
2. Is the narrator reliable and objective? Does the narrator appear too innocent, emotional, or self-deluded to be trusted?
3. Does the author directly comment on the action?
4. If it were told from a different point of view, how would your response to the story change? Would anything be lost?

Symbolism

1. Did you notice any potentially significant symbols in the story? Are they actions, characters, settings, objects, or words?
2. How do the symbols contribute to your understanding of the story?

Theme

1. Did you find a theme? If so, what is it?
2. Is the theme stated directly, or is it developed implicitly through the plot, characters, or some other element?
3. Is the theme a confirmation of conventional values, or does it challenge them?

Style, Tone, and Irony

1. Do you think the style is consistent and appropriate throughout the story? Do all the characters use the same kind of language, or did you hear different voices?
2. Would you describe the level of diction as formal or informal? Are the sentences short and simple, long and complex, or some combination?
3. How does the author's use of language contribute to the tone of the story? Did it seem, for example, intense, relaxed, sentimental, nostalgic, humorous, angry, sad, or remote?
4. Does the author's use of language bear close scrutiny so that you feel and experience more with each reading?

WRITING ABOUT POETRY

Writing about poetry can be a rigorous means of developing and testing your initial response to a poem. Anyone who has been asked to write several pages about a fourteen-line poem knows how intellectually challenging this exercise is, because it means paying close attention to language. Such scrutiny of words, however, sensitizes you not only to the poet's use of language but also to your own use of language. At first you may feel intimidated by having to compose a paper that is longer than the poem you're writing about, but once you start writing — often the hardest part of the process — you will realize that you have plenty to say. Keep in mind that there is not a single hidden meaning to any poem: it is not like algebra where you are solving for x. Even Carl Sandburg once confessed, "I've written some poetry I don't understand myself." Because language is not stable, poems are not codes to be cracked. Don't worry about "the right answer": your role is to develop an interesting thesis and to present it clearly and persuasively.

An interesting thesis will come to you if you read and reread, take notes, annotate the text, and generate ideas. Although it requires energy to read closely and to write convincingly about the charged language found in poetry, there is nothing mysterious about such reading and writing. This section provides a set of Questions for Responsive Reading and Writing designed to sharpen your reading

and writing about poetry. After reading a poem, use the questions to help you think, talk, and write about any poem. Before you do, though, be sure that you have read the poem several times without worrying actively about interpretation. With poetry, as with all literature, it's important to allow yourself the pleasure of enjoying whatever makes itself apparent to you. On subsequent readings, use the questions to understand and appreciate how the poem works; remember to keep in mind that not all questions will necessarily be relevant to a particular poem.

Following these questions is a sample paper that offers a clear and well-developed thesis concerning John Donne's "Death Be Not Proud."

Questions for Responsive Reading and Writing about Poetry

The following questions can help you respond to important elements that reveal a poem's effects and meanings. The questions are general, so not all of them will necessarily be relevant to a particular poem. Many, however, should prove useful for thinking, talking, and writing about each poem in this collection. If you are uncertain about the meaning of a term used in a question, consult the Glossary of Literary Terms.

Before addressing these questions, read the poem you are studying in its entirety. Don't worry about interpretation on a first reading; allow yourself the pleasure of enjoying whatever makes itself apparent to you. Then on subsequent readings, use the questions to understand and appreciate how the poem works.

1. Who is the speaker? Is it possible to determine the speaker's age, gender, sensibilities, level of awareness, and values?
2. Is the speaker addressing anyone in particular?

3. How do you respond to the speaker? Favorably? Negatively? What is the situation? Are there any special circumstances that inform what the speaker says?
4. Is there a specific setting of time and place?
5. Does reading the poem aloud help you understand it?
6. Does a paraphrase reveal the basic purpose of the poem?
7. What does the title emphasize?
8. Is the theme presented directly or indirectly?
9. Do any allusions enrich the poem's meaning?
10. How does the diction reveal meaning? Are any words repeated? Do any carry evocative connotative meanings? Are there any puns or other forms of verbal wit?
11. Are figures of speech used? How does the figurative language contribute to the poem's vividness and meaning?
12. Do any objects, persons, places, events, or actions have allegorical or symbolic meanings? What other details in the poem support your interpretation?
13. Is irony used? Are there any examples of situational irony, verbal irony, or dramatic irony? Is understatement or paradox used?
14. What is the tone of the poem? Is the tone consistent?
15. Does the poem use onomatopoeia, assonance, consonance, or alliteration? How do these sounds affect you?
16. What sounds are repeated? If there are rhymes, what is their effect? Do they seem forced or natural? Is there a rhyme scheme? Do the rhymes contribute to the poem's meaning?
17. Do the lines have a regular meter? What is the predominant meter? Are there significant variations? Does the rhythm seem appropriate for the poem's tone?
18. Does the poem's form — its overall structure — follow an established pattern? Do you think the form is a suitable vehicle for the poem's meaning and effects?
19. Is the language of the poem intense and concentrated? Do you think it warrants more than one or two close readings?
20. Did you respond positively to the poem? What, specifically, pleased or displeased you about what was expressed and how it was expressed?
21. Is there a particular critical approach or context that seems especially appropriate for this poem? (See Chapter 42, "Critical Strategies for Reading.")
22. What kinds of evidence from the poem are you focusing on to support your interpretation? Does your interpretation leave out any important elements that might undercut or qualify your interpretation?

THE ELEMENTS TOGETHER

The elements of poetry that you have studied in Chapters 17–25 of this book offer a vocabulary and a series of perspectives that open up avenues of inquiry into a poem. As you have learned, there are many potential routes that you can take. By asking questions about the speaker, diction, figurative language, sounds, rhythm, tone, or theme, you clarify your understanding while simultaneously sensitizing yourself to elements and issues especially relevant to the poem under consideration. This process of careful, informed reading allows you to see how the various elements of the poem reinforce its meanings.

A poem's elements do not exist in isolation, however. They work together to create a complete experience for the reader. Knowing how the elements combine helps you understand the poem's structure and appreciate it as a whole. Robert Herrick's "Delight in Disorder," for example, is more easily understood (and the humor of the poem is better appreciated) when meter and rhyme are considered together with the poem's meaning. Musing about how he is more charmed by a naturally disheveled appearance than by those that seem contrived, the speaker lists several attributes of dishevelment and concludes that they

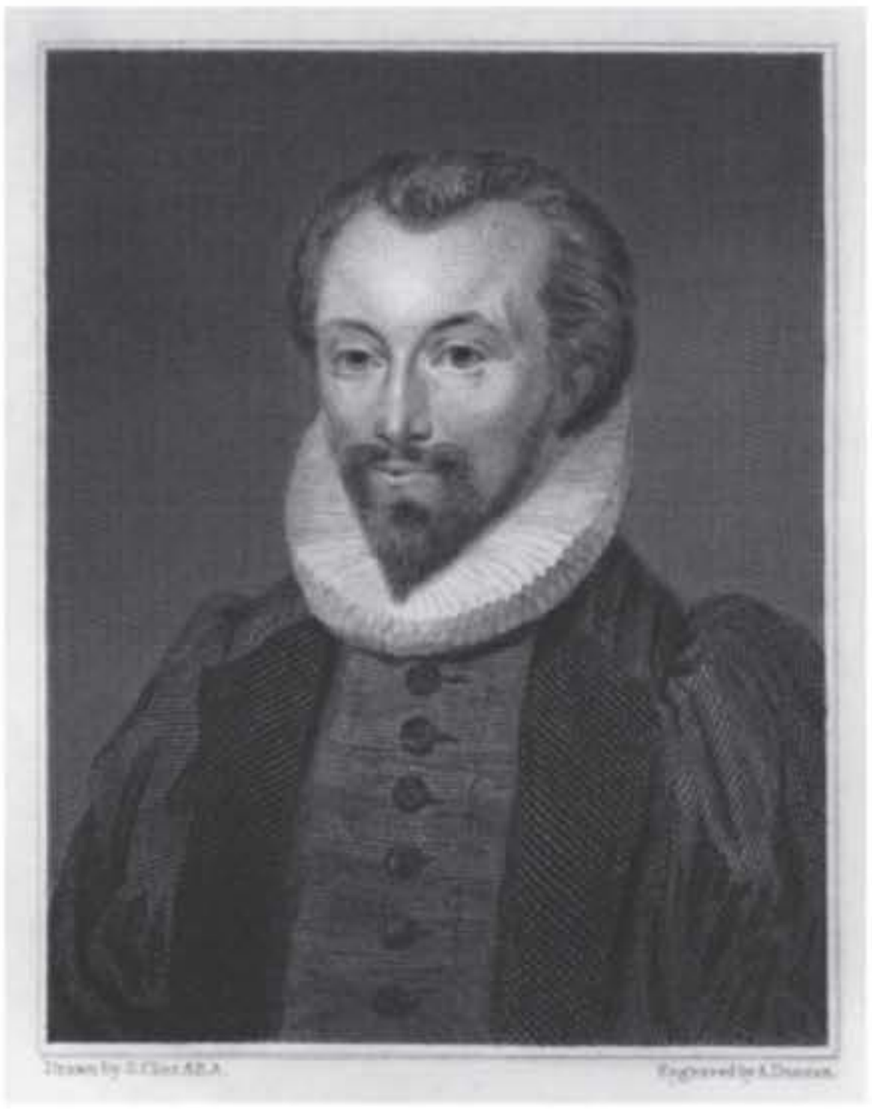
> Do more bewitch me than when art

Is too precise in every part.

Noticing how the couplet's precise and sing-songy rhythm combines with the solid, obvious, and final rhyme of *art* / *part* helps in understanding what the speaker means by "too precise," as the lines are a little too precise themselves. Noticing this, you may even want to chart how rhythm and rhyme work together throughout the early (more disheveled) lines of the poem. Finding a pattern in the ways the elements work together throughout the poem will help you understand how the poem works.

This section shows you how one student, Rose Bostwick, moves through the stages of writing about how a poem's elements combine for a final effect. Included here are Rose's annotated version of the poem, her first response, her informal outline, and the final draft of an explication of John Donne's "Death Be Not Proud." (For more on explication, see earlier in this chapter). After reviewing the elements of poetry covered in Chapters 17–25, Rose read the poem several times, paying careful attention to diction, figurative language, irony, symbol, rhythm, sound, and so on. Her final paper is more concerned with the overall effect of the combination of elements than with a line-by-line breakdown, and her annotated version of the poem details her attention to that task. As you read and reread "Death Be Not Proud," keep notes on how *you* think the elements of this poem work together and to what overall effect.

John Donne (1572–1631)



Michael Nicholson/Getty Images.

John Donne, now regarded as a major poet of the early seventeenth century, wrote love poems at the beginning of his career but shifted to religious themes after converting from Catholicism to Anglicanism in the early 1590s. Although trained in law, he was also ordained a priest and became dean of St. Paul's Cathedral in London in 1621. The following poem, from "Holy Sonnets," reflects both his religious faith and his ability to create elegant arguments in verse.

Death Be Not Proud 1611

Death be not proud, though some have callèd thee
Mighty and dreadful, for thou art not so;
For those whom thou think'st thou dost overthrow
Die not, poor Death, nor yet canst thou kill me.
From rest and sleep, which but thy pictures[1] be,
Much pleasure; then from thee much more must flow,
And soonest our best men with thee do go,
Rest of their bones, and soul's delivery.[2]
Thou art slave to Fate, Chance, kings, and desperate men,
And dost with Poison, War, and Sickness dwell;
And poppy or charms can make us sleep as well,
And better than thy stroke; why swell'st[3] thou then?
One short sleep past, we wake eternally
And death shall be no more; Death, thou shalt die.

[1] *images*

[2] *deliverance*

[3] *swell with pride*

Considerations for Critical Thinking and Writing

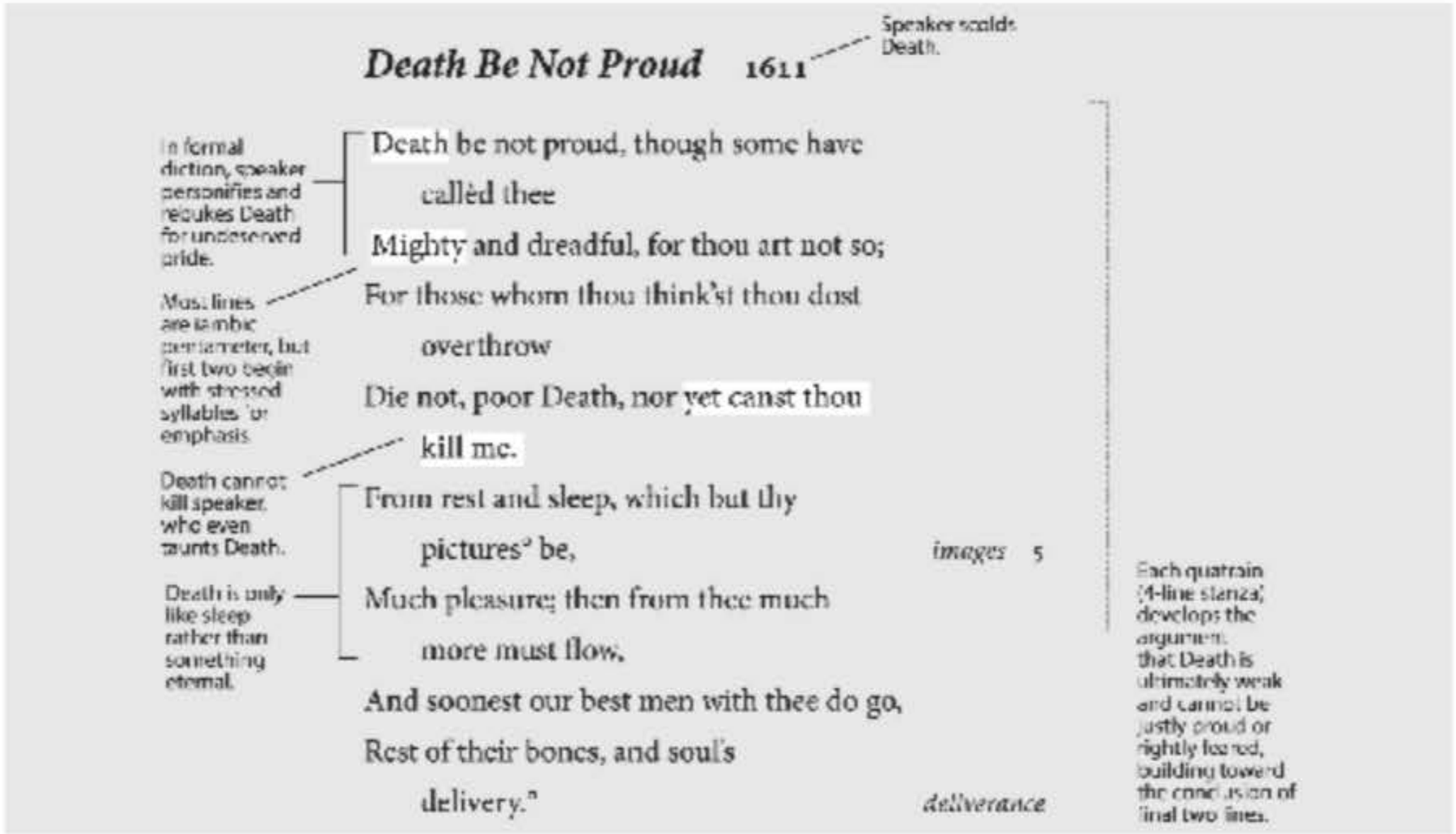
1. **FIRST RESPONSE.** Why doesn't the speaker fear death? Explain why you find the argument convincing or not.
2. How does the speaker compare death with rest and sleep in lines 5–8? What is the point of this comparison?

3. Discuss the poem's rhythm by examining the breaks and end-stopped lines. How does the poem's rhythm contribute to its meaning?
4. What are the signs that this poem is structured as a sonnet?

A SAMPLE CLOSE READING

An Annotated Version of "Death Be Not Proud"

As she read the poem closely several times, Rose annotated it with impressions and ideas that would lead to insights on which her analysis would be built. Her close examination of the poem's elements allowed her to understand how its parts contribute to its overall effect; her annotations provide a useful map of her thinking.



Description
The title reads, Death Be Not Proud 1611. [A margin note referring to the title reads, Speaker scolds Death. End note.]

The text below reads,

Line 1. Death be not proud, though some have callèd thee Line 2. Mighty and dreadful, for thou art not so; [A margin note referring to the words Death and Mighty reads, Most lines are iambic pentameter, but first two begin with stressed syllables for emphasis. End note;

another margin note referring to the first two lines reads, In formal diction, speaker personifies and rebukes Death for undeserved pride. End note.]

Line 3. For those whom thou think'st thou dost overthrow

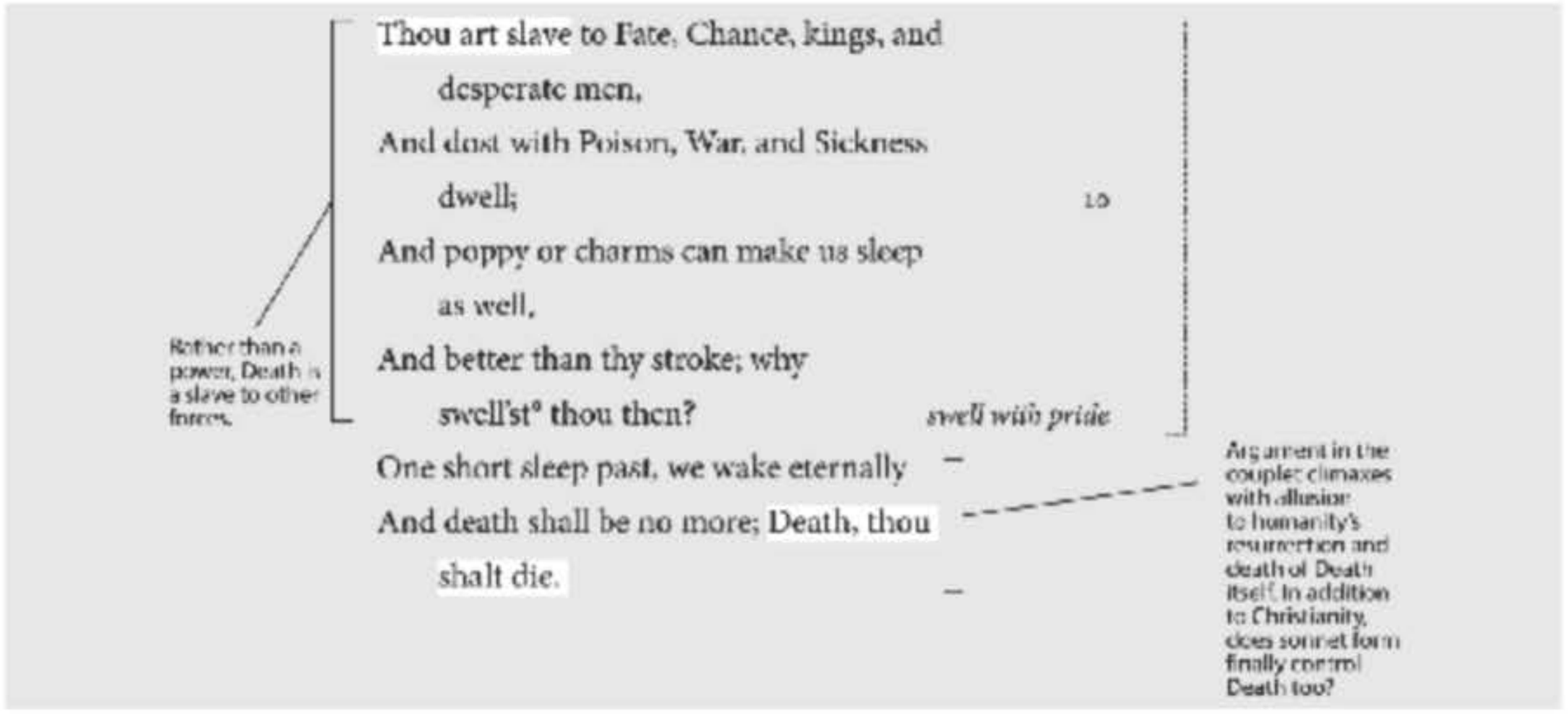
Line 4. Die not, poor Death, nor yet canst thou kill me. [A margin note referring to the phrase yet canst thou kill me reads, Death cannot kill speaker, who even taunts Death. End note.]

Line 5. From rest and sleep, which but thy pictures be, [A text referring to pictures reads, Images. End note.]

Line 6. Much pleasure; then from thee much more must flow, [A text which refers to pictures reads images and a margin note referring to fifth and sixth line reads, Death is only like sleep rather than something eternal. End note.]

Line 7. And soonest our best men with thee do go,

Line 8. Rest of their bones, and soul's delivery. [A text referring to delivery reads, Deliverance. End note.] A parenthesis marks the entire text of the poem.



Description
The text reads,

Line 9. Thou art slave to Fate, Chance, kings, and desperate men,

Line 10. And dost with Poison, War, and Sickness dwell;

Line 11. And poppy or charms can make us sleep as well,

Line 12. And better than thy stroke; why swell'st thou then?

The text referring to swell'st reads swell with pride; the phrase Thou art slave is highlighted. [A margin note referring to the text from line 9 to line 12 reads, Rather than a power, Death is a slave to other forces. End note.]

[A margin note referring to the text from line 1 to line 12 reads, Each quatrain (4-line stanza) develops the argument that Death is ultimately weak and cannot be justly proud or rightly feared, building toward the conclusion of final two lines. End note.]

Line 13. One short sleep past, we wake eternally

Line 14. And death shall be no more; Death, thou shalt die.

The phrase Death, thou shalt die is highlighted. [A margin note referring to the text in line 13 and line 14 reads, Argument in the couplet climaxes with allusion to humanity's resurrection and death of Death itself. In addition to Christianity, does sonnet form finally control Death too? End note.]

A SAMPLE FIRST RESPONSE

After Rose carefully read "Death Be Not Proud" and had a sense of how the elements work, she took the first step toward a formal explication by writing informally about the relevant elements and addressing the question *Why doesn't the speaker fear death? Explain why you find the argument convincing or not.* Note that at this point, she was not as concerned with textual evidence and detail as she would need to be in her final paper.

> I've read the poem "Death Be Not Proud" by John Donne a few times now, and I have a sense of how it works. The poem is a sonnet, and each of the three quatrains presents a piece of the argument that Death should not be proud, because it is not really all-powerful, and may even be a source of pleasure. As a reader, I resist this seeming paradox at first, but I know it must be a trick, a riddle of some sort that the poem will proceed to untangle. I think one of the reasons the poem comes off as such a powerful statement is that Donne at first seems to be playful and paradoxical in his characterizations of Death. He's almost teasing Death. But beneath the teasing tone you feel the strong foundation of the real reason Death should not be proud—Donne's faith in the immortality of the soul. The poem begins to feel more solemn as it progresses, as the hints at the idea of immortality become more clearly articulated.
>
> Donne utilizes two literary conventions to increase the effect of this poem: he uses the convention of personifying death, so that he can address it directly, and he uses the metaphor of death as a kind of sleep. These two things determine the tone and the progression from playful to solemn in the poem.

The last clause of the poem (line 14) plays with the paradoxical-seeming character of what he's been declaring. Ironically, it seems the only thing susceptible to death is death itself. Or, when death becomes powerless is when it only has power over itself.

ORGANIZING YOUR THOUGHTS

Showing in a paper how different elements of a particular poem work together is often quite challenging. While you may have a clear intuitive sense of what elements are important to the poem and how they complement one another, it is important to organize your thoughts in such a way as to make the relationships clear to your audience. The simplest way is to go line by line, but that can quickly become rote for writer and reader. Because you will want to organize your paper in the way that best serves your thesis, it may help to write an informal outline that charts how you think the argument moves. You may find, for example, that the argument is not persuasive if you start with the final lines and go back to the beginning of the poem or passage. However you decide to organize your argument, keep in mind that a unifying idea will run throughout the entire paper and that your thesis will express that idea concisely.

A SAMPLE INFORMAL OUTLINE

In her informal outline (following), Rose discovers that her argument works best if she begins at the beginning. Note that, though her later paper concerns itself with how several elements of poetry contribute to the poem's theme and message, her informal outline concerns itself much more with what that message is and how it develops as the poem progresses. She will fill in the details later.

> ***Working Thesis:*** ***From the very first word, addressing "Death" directly, Donne uses the literary conventions of personifying death and comparing it to sleep to begin an***

argument that Death should not be proud of its might or dreadfulness. But these two elements of his argument come to be seen as the superficial points when the true reason for death's powerlessness becomes clear. The Christian belief in the immortality of the soul is the reason for death's powerlessness and likeness to sleep.

Body of essay: Show how argument proceeds by quatrains from playful address to Death, and statement that Death is much like sleep, its "picture," to statement that Death is "slave" to other forces (and so should not be proud of being the mightiest), to the couplet, which articulates clearly the idea of immortality and gives the final paradox, "Death, thou shalt die."

Conclusion: Donne's faith in the immortality of the soul enables him to "prove" in this argument that Death is truly like its metaphorical representation, sleep. Faith allows him to derive a source for this conventional trope, and it allows him to state his truth in paradoxes. He relies on the conventional idea that death is an end, and a conqueror, and the only all-powerful force, to make the paradoxes that lend his argument the force of mystery — the mystery of faith.

THE ELEMENTS AND THEME

As you create an informal outline, your understanding of the poem will grow, change, and finally, solidify. You will develop a much clearer sense of what the poem's elements combine to create, and you will have chosen a scheme for organizing your argument. The next step before drafting is to generate a working thesis, which will not only keep your paper focused but will also help you center your thoughts. For papers that discuss how the elements of poetry come together, the thesis is a single and concise statement of what the elements combine to create — the idea around which all the elements revolve.

Once you understand how all of the elements of the poem fit together and have articulated your understanding in the thesis statement, the next step is to flesh out your argument. By including quotations from the poem to illustrate the points you will be making, you will better explain exactly how each element relates to the others and, more specifically, to your thesis.

A SAMPLE EXPLICATION

The Use of Conventional Metaphors for Death in John Donne's "Death Be Not Proud"

In Rose's final draft, she focuses on the use of metaphor in "Death Be Not Proud." Her essay provides a coherent reading that relates each line of the poem to the speaker's intense

awareness of death. Although the essay discusses each stanza in order, the introductory paragraph provides a brief overview explaining how the poem's metaphor and arguments contribute to its total meaning. In addition, Rose does not hesitate to discuss a line out of sequence when it can be usefully connected to another phrase. She also works quotations into her sentences to support her points. When she adds something to a quotation to clarify it, she encloses her words in brackets so that they will not be mistaken for the poet's, and she uses a slash to indicate line divisions: "soonest … with thee do go, / [for] Rest of their bones, and soul's delivery." Finally, Rose is sure to cite the line numbers for any direct quotations from the poem. As you read through her final draft, remember that the word *explication* comes from the Latin *explicare,* "to unfold." How successful do you think Rose is at unfolding this poem to reveal how its elements — here ranging from metaphor, structure, meter, personification, paradox, and irony to theme — contribute to its meaning?

WRITING ABOUT DRAMA

Because dramatic literature is written to be performed, writing about reading a play may seem twice removed from what playwrights intend the experience of drama to be: a live audience responding to live actors. Although reading a play creates distance between yourself and a performance of it, reading a play can actually bring you closer to understanding that the literary dimension of a script is what supports a stage production of any play. Writing about that script — examining carefully how the language of the stage directions, setting, exposition, dialogue, plot, and other dramatic elements serve to produce effects and meanings — can enhance an imaginative re-creation of a performance. In a sense, writing about a play gauges your own interpretative response as an audience member. The difference, of course, is that instead of applauding, you are typing.

Composing an essay about drama records more than your response to a play; writing also helps you explore, clarify, and discover dimensions of the play you may not have perceived by simply watching a performance of it. Writing is work, as we've suggested, but it's the kind of work that brings you closer to your own imagination as well as to the play. That process is more accessible if you read carefully, take notes, and annotate the text to generate ideas as we discuss earlier in this chapter. The following section offers a set of questions to help you read and write about drama and

includes a sample paper that argues for a feminist reading of Susan Glaspell's *Trifles*.

Questions for Responsive Reading and Writing about Drama

The questions in this section can help you consider important elements that reveal a play's effects and meanings. These questions are general and will not, therefore, always be relevant to a particular play. Many of them, however, should prove to be useful for thinking, talking, and writing about drama. If you are uncertain about the meaning of a term used in a question, consult the Glossary of Literary Terms.

1. Did you enjoy the play? What, specifically, pleased or displeased you about what was expressed and how it was expressed?
2. What is the significance of the play's title? How does it suggest the author's overall emphasis?
3. What information do the stage directions provide about the characters, action, and setting? Are these directions primarily descriptive, or are they also interpretive?
4. How is the exposition presented? What does it reveal? How does the playwright's choice *not* to dramatize certain events on stage help to determine what the focus of the play is?
5. In what ways is the setting important? Would the play be altered significantly if the setting were changed?
6. Are there instances of foreshadowing that suggest what is to come? Are flashbacks used to dramatize what has already happened?
7. What is the major conflict the protagonist faces? What complications constitute the rising action? Where is the climax? Is the conflict resolved?
8. Are one or more subplots used to qualify or complicate the main plot? Is the plot unified so that each incident somehow has a function that relates it to some other element in the play?
9. Does the author purposely avoid a pyramidal plot structure of rising action, climax, and falling action? Is the plot experimental? Is the plot logically and chronologically organized, or is it fantastical or absurd? What effects are produced by the plot? How does it reflect the author's view of life?
10. Who is the protagonist? Who (or what) is the antagonist?

11. By what means does the playwright reveal character? What do the characters' names, physical qualities, actions, and words convey about them? What do the characters reveal about each other?
12. What is the purpose of the minor characters? Are they individualized, or do they primarily represent ideas or attitudes? Are any character foils used?
13. Do the characters all use the same kind of language, or is their speech differentiated? Is it formal or informal? How do the characters' diction and manner of speaking serve to characterize them?
14. Does your response to the characters change in the course of the play? What causes the change?
15. Are words and images repeated in the play so that they take on special meanings? Which speeches seem particularly important? Why?
16. How does the playwright's use of language contribute to the tone of the play? Is the dialogue, for example, predominantly light, humorous, relaxed, sentimental, sad, angry, intense, or violent?
17. Are any symbols used in the play? Which actions, characters, settings, objects, or words convey more than their literal meanings?
18. Are any unfamiliar theatrical conventions used that present problems in understanding the play? How does knowing more about the nature of the theater from which the play originated help to resolve these problems?
19. Is the theme stated directly, or is it developed implicitly through the plot, characters, or some other element? Does the theme confirm or challenge most people's values?
20. How does the play reflect the values of the society in which it is set and in which it was written?
21. How does the play reflect or challenge your own values?
22. Is there a sound recording, film, or online source for the play available in your library or media center? How does this version compare with your own reading?
23. How would you produce the play on a stage? Consider scenery, costumes, casting, and characterizations. What would you emphasize most in your production?
24. Is there a particular critical approach or context that seems especially appropriate for this play? (See Chapter 42, "Critical Strategies for Reading.")