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Thinking Critically about Your Writing

Learning Outcomes

After reading this chapter, you should be able to do the following:

- LO1** Distinguish fact from opinion
- LO2** Evaluate supporting evidence
- LO3** Detect bias in your writing
- LO4** Understand logic

As you write about literature, you should carefully assess the strength of the ideas you present to readers. This is especially true in **literary arguments**, essays in which you take a stand on a debatable topic and try to convince readers to accept your position (see Chapter 5). If you learn to **think critically** about your writing, you will be able to distinguish fact from opinion, evaluate the usefulness and appropriateness of your supporting evidence, and keep any biases you have out of your writing. Then, guided by the basic principles of inductive and deductive reasoning, you will be able to structure your literary argument in a way that will encourage readers to accept (or at least acknowledge) the strengths of your ideas.

LO1 Distinguish Fact from Opinion

A **fact** is a verifiable statement that something is true or that something occurred. An **opinion** is a personal judgment or belief that can never be substantiated beyond any doubt and is, therefore, debatable.

Fact: Langston Hughes mentions four rivers in his poem “The Negro Speaks of Rivers.”

Opinion: Rivers have symbolic significance in Langston Hughes's poem "The Negro Speaks of Rivers."

An opinion may be *unsupported* or *supported*.

Unsupported Opinion: Rivers have symbolic significance in Langston Hughes's poem "The Negro Speaks of Rivers."

Supported Opinion: Rivers have symbolic significance in Langston Hughes's poem "The Negro Speaks of Rivers." In the poem, the speaker mentions four rivers—the Euphrates, the Congo, the Nile, and the Mississippi. According to the speaker, these rivers are as "ancient as the world and as old as the flow of human blood in human veins" (line 2). Through their associations with the black experience, these particular rivers are linked not only to the speaker's African roots but also to the racial situation in America at the time the poem was written.

As the above examples show, supported opinion is more convincing than unsupported opinion.

SUPPORTING YOUR OPINIONS

Your opinions can be supported with **examples**, **quotations**, or **expert opinion**.

Examples:

In the play *The Glass Menagerie*, Jim's focus on the future challenges Amanda's unrealistic romantic dreams of the past. For example, when Jim comes to dinner, she dreams of entertaining him in the old Southern tradition, but he talks enthusiastically of the promise the future holds.

Quotations:

Although Gertrude is queen of Denmark, she is also a devoted mother. In her efforts to console her son, she speaks tenderly: "Good Hamlet, cast thy knighted color off" (1.2.68). She also conveys her wisdom about life: "Thou know'st 'tis common,—all that live must die, / Passing through nature to eternity" (1.2.72-73).

Expert Opinion (From Literary Criticism):

Throughout the short story "The Yellow Wallpaper," a number of clues suggest that the narrator has lost her hold on reality. According to Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar in *Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination*, the extent of the narrator's dislike for the wallpaper should serve as an early warning that she is not responding well to her treatment and that she may in fact be losing her mind (464).

LO2 Evaluate Supporting Evidence

The examples, quotations, and opinions of literary critics that you use to support your statements constitute **evidence**. The more **reliable** your supporting evidence, the more willing your readers will be to accept a statement. Remember, though, that to be reliable the evidence you use must be *accurate*, *sufficient*, *representative*, and *relevant*.

For your evidence to be **accurate**, it must come from a trustworthy source. Such a source quotes *exactly* and does not present information out of context. It also presents examples, quotations, and expert opinion fairly, drawing them from other reliable sources.

For your evidence to be **sufficient**, you must present an adequate amount of evidence. It is not enough, for instance, to cite just one example from a Joyce Carol Oates short story in an attempt to demonstrate that her experiments with literary form and subject matter give her work universal appeal. Moreover, the opinions of a single literary critic, no matter how reputable, are not enough to support this position.

For your evidence to be **representative**, it must reflect a range of sources and viewpoints. You should not choose evidence that simply supports your thesis and ignore evidence that does not. For example, if you are making the point that the structure of Emily Dickinson's poems changed over the course of her career, you cannot disregard compelling evidence that, in fact, her poetic structure remained consistent over the years.

Finally, for your evidence to be **relevant**, it must apply to the case being discussed. For example, you cannot support the assertion that Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* critiques post–World War II American society by citing examples from Miller's *The Crucible*.

LO3 Detect Bias in Your Writing

A **bias** is an opinion, usually unfavorable, based on preconceived ideas rather than on evidence. As a critical thinker, you should be aware that your biases can sometimes lead you to see just what you want to see and to select evidence that is consistent with these biases.

DETECTING BIAS IN YOUR WRITING

When you write, be on the lookout for the following kinds of biases:

- **Slanted language:** Avoid slanted language—language that is inflammatory or confrontational. For example, do not say that a literary critic's article is stupid or that a character in a short story is immoral. Instead, use language that clearly and accurately conveys your ideas.
- **Biased tone:** Avoid using a tone that communicates bias toward your subject (for example, anger or sarcasm).
- **Stereotypes:** Avoid statements that perpetuate stereotypes. For example, be careful not to make unwarranted assumptions about gender roles or about a particular groups' attributes or shortcomings and then criticize characters on the basis of these generalizations. For example, saying that Andy in "Doe Season" gets what she deserves because a deer hunt is no place for girls stereotypes the character and reveals gender bias.
- **Preconceived ideas:** Don't let your own beliefs or attitudes prevent you from fairly evaluating a work of literature. For example, you may believe strongly that husbands and wives should be faithful to each other, but you should not let this belief prevent you from appreciating the literary strengths of Kate Chopin's "The Storm," a short story in which two characters commit adultery, apparently with no consequences.

LO4 Understand Logic

All argumentative essays, including literary arguments, rely on **logic**—inductive and deductive reasoning—to reach conclusions in a systematic way. If you understand the basic principles of inductive and deductive reasoning, you will be able to write clearer, more convincing essays.

INDUCTIVE REASONING

Inductive reasoning is a process that moves from specific facts, observations, or experiences to a general conclusion. You use inductive reasoning in your writing when you want to lead readers from a series of specific

observations to a general conclusion. You can see how inductive reasoning operates by studying the following list of statements about John Updike's short story "A&P":

- Sammy, the main character in "A&P," is nineteen and works as a cashier in a supermarket in a small New England town.
- Sammy sees the A&P's customers as sheep, with no individuality.
- Sammy's fellow workers include Stokesie, a married twenty-two-year-old with two children, and Lengel, the store manager.
- Stokesie and Lengel lead boring, predictable lives.
- On the day the story takes place, three girls in bathing suits walk into the store and change Sammy's life.
- Sammy fantasizes about the girls' lives and imagines what a party at one girl's home would be like.
- When Lengel scolds the girls for dressing inappropriately, Sammy abruptly quits his job.
- At the end of the story, Sammy realizes that although some people think he was foolish to quit his job, he did the right thing.

After reading the statements above, you can use inductive reasoning to reach a general conclusion about the theme of Updike's story: that someone who wants to escape a confining life must sometimes make a break with his community's values.

No matter how much evidence you present, an inductive conclusion is never certain, only probable. You arrive at an inductive conclusion by making an **inference**, a statement about the unknown based on the known. In order to bridge the gap that exists between your specific observations and your general conclusion, you have to make an **inductive leap**. If you have presented enough specific evidence, this gap will be relatively small and your readers will accept your conclusion. If the gap is too wide, your readers will accuse you of making a **hasty generalization**—a conclusion based on too little evidence.

DEDUCTIVE REASONING

Deductive reasoning is a process that moves from a general statement believed to be true or **self-evident** (so obvious that it needs no proof) to a specific conclusion. Writers use deductive reasoning when they think their audience is more likely to be influenced by logic than by evidence. The process of deduction has traditionally been illustrated by a **syllogism**, a three-part set of statements or propositions that includes a *major premise*, a *minor premise*, and a *conclusion*.

Major Premise: All tragic heroes have tragic flaws.

Minor Premise: Hamlet is a tragic hero.

Conclusion: Therefore, Hamlet has a tragic flaw.

"A syllogism is valid when its conclusion logically follows from its premises. A syllogism is true when the information it contains is consistent with the facts."

The major premise of a syllogism makes a general statement that the writer believes to be true or self-evident. The minor premise presents a specific example of the belief that is stated in the major premise. If the reasoning is sound, the conclusion should follow from the two premises. (Note that the conclusion should introduce no terms that have not already ap-

peared in the major and minor premises.) The advantage of a deductive argument is that if readers accept the premises, they usually grant the conclusion.

A syllogism is **valid** when its conclusion logically follows from its premises. A syllogism is **true** when the information it contains is consistent with the facts. To be **sound**, a syllogism must be *both* valid and true. However, a syllogism can be valid without being true or true without being valid. The following syllogism, for example, is valid but not true.

Major Premise: All poems contain rhymed lines.

Minor Premise: Walt Whitman's "Had I the Choice" is a poem.

Conclusion: Therefore, Walt Whitman's "Had I the Choice" contains rhymed lines.

This syllogism is valid. In the major premise, the phrase *all poems* establishes that the entire class *poems* contains rhymed lines. After Walt Whitman's "Had I the Choice" is identified as a poem, the conclusion that it contains rhymed lines logically follows. However, Whitman's poem, like many others, is unrhymed. Because the major premise of this syllogism is not true, no conclusion based on it can be true. For this reason, even though the logic of the syllogism is correct, its conclusion is not.

TOULMIN LOGIC

Stephen Toulmin, a philosopher and rhetorician, has formulated another way to understand logical thinking. According to Toulmin, the traditional syllogism, while useful for identifying flaws in logic, is not useful for analyzing arguments that occur in the real world. To address this shortcoming, Toulmin divides arguments into three parts: the *claim*, the *grounds*, and the *warrant*:

- **The claim** is your thesis, the main point that you want to make in your essay.
- **The grounds** are the facts, examples, and opinions of experts that support your claim. In essays about literature, the grounds can come from a work of literature or from literary criticism.
- **The warrant** is an assumption that underlies both the claim and the grounds. Keep in mind that some warrants are explicitly stated while others may be simply implied.

In its simplest terms, an argument following Toulmin's structure would look like this:

- **The claim:** Phoenix Jackson, the main character in Eudora Welty's "A Worn Path," challenges the racial restrictions of her community.
- **The grounds:** Phoenix Jackson defies the man with the gun; she asks a white woman to tie her shoe; she steals a nickel; she gets free medicine from the doctor.
- **The warrant:** At the time "A Worn Path" takes place, racial segregation limited the actions of African Americans.

Notice that the claim presents a specific situation; the warrant, however, is a general principle that could apply to a number of situations. In a sense, the warrant is similar to the major premise of a syllogism, and the claim is similar to the conclusion. The grounds consist of the evidence that supports the claim.

RECOGNIZING LOGICAL FALLACIES

Logical fallacies are flawed arguments. A writer who inadvertently uses such fallacies is not thinking clearly or logically; a writer who intentionally uses them is trying to deceive readers. Learn to recognize them so you can avoid them when you write.

COMMON LOGICAL FALLACIES

- **Hasty Generalization:** A form of induction that reaches a conclusion on the basis of too little evidence. For example, one appearance of a river in a poem is not enough to support the statement that it is an important symbol. Several mentions, however, might justify this conclusion.
- **Sweeping Generalization:** A generalization that cannot be supported no matter how much evidence is supplied. For example, the statement "All literary critics like August Wilson's plays" is a sweeping generalization. Certainly, many critics like Wilson's plays, but it is virtually impossible to prove that all do. To avoid making statements that cannot be supported, qualify your statements with words such as *some*, *many*, *often*, or *most*.
- **Ad Hominem (Argument to the Person):** A fallacy that occurs when you attack a person rather than the issue, as in the following argument: "Many critics see Imagism as a very important literary movement. However, the fact that its founder, Ezra Pound, was a Nazi sympathizer challenges that assessment." Although you may find Pound's Nazi sympathies repugnant, his political ideas are not relevant to your evaluation of Imagism.
- **Non Sequitur:** A conclusion that does not logically follow from what comes before it, as in the following statement: "John Updike writes critically acclaimed novels, so he must be a gifted poet." It does not logically follow that just because Updike can write good novels, he can also write good poetry.
- **Either/Or Fallacy:** A fallacy that occurs when a complex issue is presented as if it has only two sides. If you ask your readers to consider whether a character is good or evil, you commit this fallacy. In fact, a complex character may possess both positive and negative qualities.
- **Begging the Question:** A fallacy that occurs when you present a debatable premise as if it were true, as in the following statement: "Hemingway's negative portrayals of women have caused his popularity to decline in recent years." Hemingway's portrayals of women may be negative, but readers do not have to accept this statement as fact just because you say it is true. Before you can make a judgment based on this assertion, you must support it with examples from Hemingway's work as well as with statements from a fair range of literary critics.
- **Bandwagon:** A fallacy that occurs when you try to establish that something is true just because everyone believes it is. You commit this fallacy when you say, for example, that a certain literary work must be good because it is so popular.