

Start

Small,

Start

Strange

An Approach to Analytical Thinking

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1 Introduction

We like both the coherent structure of something and that little bit of surprise, that little bit of novelty.

— Dr. Katherine Mack, speaking of astrophysics,
on the podcast *The Universe* (episode 9)

College-level analytical writing makes everyone nervous, in part because nobody can give you a formula for producing high-quality work every time. This guide isn't a magic formula, either. It does, however, offer a set of procedures and checkpoints that can help you understand the expectations of analytical writing, generate ideas to discuss, and develop your editorial eye as you read your own or others' analytical writing.

The arc of this guide's advice is simple, though not always easy to execute:

- Start by noticing striking details—simple words or images or actions that grab your attention for whatever reason, especially if they seem odd or prompt questions.
- Select details that connect with one another to create patterns. A whole lot of analytical writing consists of describing the patterns that build meaning, along with notable exceptions to those patterns.
- Use other people's ideas—class sessions, conversations with friends, library sources—to add depth and reach to your analysis of the patterns and exceptions. (And when you use other people's ideas, acknowledge them by citing them.)

In short, *big ideas start small and strange*. If you start an analytical project with a big idea—the nature of love in tragedy, how enzymes work, the movements of celestial objects—you'll have a very hard time gathering evidence and building your analysis.

Instead, think of how many famous stories of discovery in any field begin with an odd detail. An astronomer thought Mercury should be in one place, but instead it was in a slightly different place. After an accident, a person's speech changes in an unexpected way. The relationship between interest rates and inflation does not behave as it usually does. A character uses a surprising metaphor at the beginning of a play.

The structure of intellectual discovery generally begins with those kinds of observations— noticing details, seeing how they form patterns, paying special attention when the patterns break. Start small, start strange.

2 Close Reading

How do we identify the small, telling details that we can use to build effective analytical writing? In any field, the process begins by paying careful attention to our object of study. In literature, we call that process close reading. There is no one way to perform close reading, but we can describe some basic steps that capture a good deal of how scholars have approached literary works for generations.

Close Reading, Formalism, and the New Criticism

Close reading involves paying careful attention to the details of a text: its diction, syntax, patterns of imagery and metaphor, and so forth. The practice of close reading has become central to most forms of literary criticism. (There are exceptions: for example, some critics study the production, circulation, and purchasing of literary works in ways that do not require close reading of the works themselves.) One can trace theories and applications of close readings from Classical philosophy to the present, but the practice took its place as the dominant mode of literary study in the twentieth century as a result of New Criticism.

The New Critics, a group of mostly American critics in the early to middle twentieth century, reacted to the impressionistic, biographical, and often moralistic approaches of many earlier critics. Using a formalist approach to a text that sought links between the smallest details of a work and its broadest, even mythical aspects, the New Critics followed the poet Coleridge in thinking of the literary work as an organic whole—that is, as like a living thing with diverse parts but a recognizable order and identity. The New Critics therefore emphasized close reading as a way of discovering the tensions and paradoxes of a text to find their resolution into a coherent whole; this approach de-emphasizes contextual considerations and sometimes leads to the neglect of the parts of a text that trouble its coherence.

Many later schools of criticism—deconstruction, feminist criticism, Marxist/Marxian criticism, and so forth—use close reading to other ends, often paying special attention to the fragments and disruptions that disturb the wholeness of literary works. Often, these newer approaches to literature connect their attention to the disruptive details of literary works—the elements that make it difficult to create a neatly consistent reading of the whole—to the disruptive elements of social formations or power structures. The people and narratives that sometimes get omitted in broad social narratives often attract special attention from these scholars.

How to Do a Close Reading: One Approach

There is no single approach to doing a close reading of a literary text or passage. (Google “close reading” to see a variety of approaches from professors at other colleges.) Here is a sketch of a method that you may find useful.

- **Choose a method of capturing information before you read.** You cannot do an effective close reading without recording your thoughts as you read. The easiest way to do this is probably to use a pencil to annotate your text. You may also find that a computer or some other note-taking technology works well for you, especially when you read a text (such as a library book) that you cannot mark with a pencil. *Do not use a highlighter for close reading.* Highlighting is too blunt an instrument for recording thoughts of any complexity.
- **Make sure you know the meanings of the text’s words.** If you do not know the meaning of a word, look it up. If you see a word you think you know used in a way that appears strange, use the *Oxford English Dictionary* (available through the databases section of the library’s website) to check its meanings. The *OED* gives chronologically arranged quotations for every definition, so it is a miraculously useful tool for discovering older meanings of English words.
- **Identify the text’s voice and implied audience.** Who is speaking to whom? Does the text invite you to question the authority of some speaker or speakers? What is the tone of the text or its speakers?
- **Identify the text’s genre and structure.** How does the author respond to the reader’s expectations for a genre (as in a sonnet, a play, or a novel)? Once the reader recognizes the form of the text, how does the author use or alter that form?
- **Looking for patterns, identify the text’s imagery and metaphors.** Look especially for details that do not seem necessary to the simple plot or action of the text. How does the text evoke ideas and contexts other than those suggested by the text’s literal action? Remember that part of the importance of seeking patterns is to be able to identify breaks with the patterns you find. The strange parts of a text are often the most interesting.
- **Ask questions about the implications of what you have found.** At this point, your close reading could lead you to any number of approaches to the text. You may find, for example, that your attention to word choice leads you to a cultural analysis of a concept in the author’s time. You may find that an author attaches a certain kind of image to a certain character, or female characters, or to Germany. You may find that the text’s narrator plays with the reader’s expectations about the work’s genre in a way that leads you to conclusions about the reliability of the narrator. The key here is to move beyond gathering details to wondering what a given set of details tells you about the subtle meanings of a text.

Real Writing from Real Students: Close Reading

Through the close-up tracking shot, we see that the streets and the buildings are blue and that everyone is either in blue outfits or has some amount of blue in their outfits. However, we also notice an intriguing detail of a woman dressed in red, who appears in multiple parts of the path the tracking shot takes.

These ‘brighter’ scenes incorporate much more natural light than scenes like the interrogation room and at Richard McGee’s house, where not only is it darker, but much of the light is also artificial, coming from lampshades and light bulbs.

When Kingsley is on the bus to go to the ESN school for the first time, it is clear that the students there have little adult guidance. In contrast to the school in which Kingsley had come from, there are no uniforms required for this one. [. . .] These moments of lack of restraint serve to highlight the absence of care that these students receive.

For a moment, he even tries to regain control and ownership of the situation, but as he is unable to fight them off, Easy is forced to listen to Albright who sits knees wide apart, now the momentary master of the house.

She was afraid of his father for his violence “had begun to threaten her” (*D* 30), while she had also promised to her past mother “to keep the home together as long as she could” (*D* 31). Her father's violent control over her and her mother’s tender expectation socially and ideologically motivated Eveline to make a promise to her family.

3 The Thesis

The Big Picture

My handout on Five Ways of Looking at a Thesis follows this page. The Five Ways will help you evaluate a thesis, but it does not necessarily help you generate your own idea in the first place. For thesis generation, remember the title of this guide: **start small, start strange**.

When you begin your analysis of a piece by noting details, you give yourself building blocks that you can use to construct a thesis. When you observe details in close reading, pay special attention to the ones that make you think either “Oh, I’ve seen something like that before” or “I didn’t expect to see that!”

You may realize by now that this guide leans heavily on those two kinds of thoughts: insights come from recognizing patterns and surprises.

Where Does the Thesis Go?

Many disciplines have specific guidelines for the location of a thesis statement in a written piece. English does not. However, scholarly writing in English does generally place a thesis statement near the end of the first section of an essay. For a short paper, that might mean the last sentence of the first paragraph is a thesis statement. For a long essay broken into multi-page sections, the thesis might arise at the end of the first section. Some essays might begin with a tightly focused question and then come to the main thesis statement at the end—but even in those cases, the intellectual direction of the paper becomes clear by the end of the opening section.

Does a Thesis Have to Be One Sentence?

I generally use the phrase “thesis statement” rather than “thesis sentence” because theses can sometimes take the form of two (or occasionally more) linked sentences. The key is to present the thesis clearly and concisely: don’t let it sprawl across multiple sentences in a way that asks your reader to piece it together.

Using “AI” Assistance in Thesis Generation

I’ve heard some students say that they don’t use Large Language Models (LLMs) such as ChatGPT for writing—just for generating some ideas to write about. Even leaving issues of academic honesty aside, using LLMs in that way is an extremely bad strategy for analytical writing.

LLMs identify and mimic patterns in huge samples of writing. They therefore generate text that imitates the kind of thing people write in a given situation, with a bit of randomization thrown in to provide something that seems like individuality. For analytical writing, the result is that LLM output is nearly always bland (because of the broad imitation) and, too often, obviously wrong (because of the randomization). Such ideas are not only ineffective in analytical writing; they are especially hard to revise into effective writing because they lack the details that grow into strong theses. To generate ideas, use the processes of close readings, not LLMs.

Real Writing from Real Students: The Thesis

Contrary to what most viewers would assume, Judy/Madeleine is not the misleading villain in the pair—Scottie, consumed by Hitchcock’s projected male gaze, is the driving force of conflict and doom in their story.

Vertigo is a story about artificial rebirth, and Hitchcock tells it with something we see daily: the color green.

By looking at the paintings throughout the background of Sam’s house, we can draw connections between images of horses and the history of the Maltese falcon itself, which reveals how the Knight Templar’s trade and thievery parallel those of the film.

However, the poem’s speaker does not focus solely on observations of the natural world; this same theme is also applied to the realms of human construction and human culture, all of which intersect at the unique framing device: ships.

In “Sonnet Isolate,” Anne Carson employs unconventional pronoun usage to explore the complexities of human identity and the struggle to define oneself amidst societal expectations, ultimately highlighting the fluid nature of individuality and interconnectedness.

4 Transitions

This guide pushes you to start your analytical thinking with small observations, but, of course, those observations need eventually to connect and grow into broader ideas. They do so by forming paragraphs that link a set of details to support a larger observation. The transitions between paragraphs then connect the larger observations.

That idea of connecting observations can sound vague, so this section gives you a couple of quick ways to evaluate whether your transitions work well. You can look at the first sentence in each of your paragraphs and ask whether it performs the two functions of analytical transitions.

Function 1: A Transition Develops One of Your Ideas

Transition sentences—the first sentence of each paragraph after the introduction—give your reader important guidance about the shape of your argument. A new paragraph needs a reason to begin, and the reason should come from your ideas, not (or not only) those of the text under discussion. Even if the structure of your paper follows the chronological development of the text, your transitions can keep the reader located in the text and in the progress of your own thoughts.

Example 1: plot-based transition (does not include the writer's own idea)

In the next scene, Batman returns to his cave.

Example 2: idea-based transition (connects the plot point to the writer's idea)

When Batman returns to his cave, where he has earlier performed the role of student, he now becomes a new kind of teacher.

The second example conveys plot information, but it attaches the plot point to the writer's idea. However, advancing your own argument with the transition does not exclude using other people's ideas.

Example 3: Idea-based transition with secondary source

When Batman returns to his cave, however, he becomes the kind of "transformative mentor" described by Clevercritic (42).

Here, although drawing on Clevercritic's concept, the writer takes control, linking that concept to the Batman text to place both in the structure of the writer's own argument.

Function 2: A Transition Links the New Paragraph to the Previous One

Let's return to those three examples:

Example 1: plot-based transition

In the next scene, Batman returns to his cave.

Example 2: idea-based transition (based on plot progression in this case)

When Batman returns to his cave, where he has earlier performed the role of student, he now becomes a new kind of teacher.

Example 3: Idea-based transition with secondary source

When Batman returns to his cave, however, he becomes the kind of “transformative mentor” described by Clevercritic (42).

By linking two paragraphs, the transition becomes a transition rather than simply being the opening of a new paragraph. In this sense, example 1 is not a transition at all: it does not tell the reader how the paper's argument will change from the previous paragraph to the new one. (Instead, it explains something that happens in the plot of the Batman text.)

Examples 2 and 3, however, do explain the connection of the new paragraph to previous parts of the essay. Example 2 refers to Batman's roles of the teacher and student that the paper seems already to have established. Example 3's use of “however” performs a similar function: the new paragraph presumably describes a change in Batman's role from what the paper has already described.

When examples 2 and 3 display the writer's awareness that the new paragraph builds on the paper's established material but adds a new element to the argument, they become effective transitions.

Final Note: Contrast Is Good!

Any connection between two paragraphs will help your reader follow your ideas, but the most effective connections often involve contrast rather than addition. If your transitions mostly follow the logic of addition—“also,” “additionally,” “another example,” “moreover”—that tendency might indicate that the thesis is too broad. Transitions of contrast—“however,” “yet,” “but,” “still,” “that said”—indicate that the analysis is sufficiently complex to support working through a series of ways of seeing the essay's subject matter. Scholarly writing values that kind of complexity and tension.

Real Writing from Real Students: Transitions

While Maria and Marie are separated by time and place, they are bonded by their shared acts of resistance against systems that aim to control them.

Although he praises that familiar Irish hospitality, Gabriel, aware of his aging relatives, asserts the notion of a new generation, “a generation actuated by new ideas and new principles.”

D.C. and West London serve as the backdrops for these characters’ ghosts, configuring their modes of resistance to ancestral structures.

While the creativity within the frame of blank verse promotes cultural prospects in the context of social industrialization through the irreplaceable visual wall, the poetic techniques challenge this idea by extending the holes on the wall.

While both Eveline and Maria share a sense of confinement in their routines as demonstrated by a trend of repetitive language, these two women experience different levels of satisfaction with their mundane lives.

5 Quotations and Sources

How Small and Strange Ideas Power Up

The whole approach of this guide relies on the importance of starting with small, strange details; they give you the precision and surprise that build into compelling analysis. After that beginning, however, you need ways to help the small, strange details come together into larger ideas that reach further. The best way to do that is to enter into conversation with other thinkers. Scholarly writers, theorists, and historical researchers can help you out.

For example, say you find a moment in a short story set in 1910s Ireland in which a young woman thinks about marriage. Close reading can take you a long way: you can find other details that relate to marriage, or you can look for patterns of metaphor that connect marriage to other ideas in the story. You can think of marriage abstractly; are there other ways that people or ideas are “wedded” in the story?

Reading the story itself has limits, however. By looking to other people’s research, you can help your ideas take off by entering into conversation with other scholars. Reference sources can help you understand the usage of specific words in Ireland or in the 1910s. Literary theorists might help you think about the history of marriage as an institution of power and property, or they might lead you to think about gender relations in the story as intersecting with issues of class and colonialism. Historians might help you understand the national as well as personal resonance of “union” at the time. You might find scholars writing about the story directly (secondary sources) that help you understand the existing scholarly conversation about the story and how your close reading can help you contribute your own ideas.

You can find small, strange details on your own. The larger and more complex your project becomes, the more it will help you to join the global, transhistorical team of your fellow scholars.

Keep Your Hands on the Wheel

When you enter that scholarly conversation, it can be tempting to put someone else’s ideas in control of your writing. They are professionals who likely have much more experience with analytical writing than you do. But you have a place in the conversation, and you can claim it!

Here’s how. First, use some version of “they say / I say” writing. *They Say / I Say* is the title of a book on college writing by Gerald Graff and Cathy Birkenstein. I like their formulation a lot because it emphasizes both sides of the conversations. You need to represent other writers’ ideas carefully and accurately. In most cases, I recommend using the other scholars’ names explicitly in your text. You don’t have to add more than that, such as article titles. You can say their names and ideas, as in “Graff and Birkenstein contend that college writing involves a process of . . .”

Once you have established the other person or people’s ideas, respond to them! (This is the “I Say” part.) If you use a quotation, set it off in a sentence with some of your own words. Use your own ideas to end paragraphs and papers. The details of your close reading often provide this kind of response; you can use a larger idea from someone else, then show how it manifests itself or changes in relation to your chosen details.

Real Writing from Real Students: Quotations and Sources

The end of the poem brings an untimely end to the father-child relationship as the patterns of division between them are further communicated through the imagery of “a dark colt paused in downpour.”¹

One specific society was the League, which was impactful because it “gave women a direct stake in the development of Ireland in the new century in the public and private realms and paved the way for further involvement in cultural and cultural-political politics” in future endeavors.²

This house is made even more precious by the fact that redlining and racially restrictive covenants in the 20th century made it so that – as Terry Gross writes in her article – “African-Americans were left out of the new suburban communities” and were “pushed instead into urban housing projects.”³

In film noir, the *femme fatale*, or fatal woman, is “she who brings disaster to anyone with whom she becomes romantically involved.”⁴

In *Hollywood Films as Social Studies Curriculum: Advancing a Critical Media Literacy Approach to Analyzing Black Male Representation*, the two authors report that many American movies are used in a classroom setting, especially in social studies classes. Many of the films illustrate black males in four uniform categories: “(1) absent and wandering, (2) impotent and powerless, (3) soulful and adaptive, and (4) endangered due to criminal inclination related to violence.”⁵

¹ “Poetry Reading: Ocean Vuong,” Archive on Demand, March 29, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZiVvQyvIPY4>, 06:50.

² Senia Pašeta, *Irish Nationalist Women, 1900–1918* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 20.

³ Terry Gross, “A ‘Forgotten History’ Of How The U.S. Government Segregated America,” *National Public Radio*, May 3, 2017, <https://www.npr.org/2017/05/03/526655831/a-forgotten-history-of-how-the-u-s-government-segregated-america>.

⁴ René Ostberg, “femme fatale,” in *Encyclopedia Britannica* (2023), <https://www.britannica.com/topic/femme-fatale>.

⁵ Charise Pimentel and Christopher L. Busey, “Hollywood Films as Social Studies Curriculum: Advancing a Critical Media Literacy Approach to Analyzing Black Male Representation,” *Critical Education* 9, no. 4 (March 1, 2018): 4.

6 Titles

Why Pay Attention to the Title?

An effective title shows that you think of the reader as someone making choices about how to spend their time, and you want to persuade them to give some of that time to reading your paper. If your title is something like “Poetry Analysis” or “Shakespeare Paper”—or if it has no title at all—the message it sends is “I assume that my reader is someone who is essentially required to read this, so whatever.”

A title that might persuade a reader to spend their time with your paper will generally do two things: it will say what text you want to analyze, and it will give at least a hint of how you will approach it. Such a title sends a different message: it says, “I want to join the community of scholars discussing this text, and here is why.” Your title serves as your self-introduction to the conversation.

The Academic Colon: Analytical Writing’s Smiley Face

Some titles of analytical papers use a colon to join two sections of a title. Usually, one side of the colon expresses something playful and engaging, while the other side offers a more straightforward description of the paper’s topic. If I look at the first page of Google Scholar results for Toni Morrison’s novel *Song of Solomon*, some of the titles do not use a colon, such as these:

“Orality, Literacy, and Memory in Toni Morrison’s *Song of Solomon*”

“Toni Morrison, *Song of Solomon* and Black Cultural Nationalism”

“Folklore and Community in *Song of Solomon*”

Many, however, do use a colon, including these:

“Civilizations Underneath: African Heritage as Cultural Discourse in Toni Morrison’s *Song of Solomon*”

“The Novelist as Conservator: Stories and Comprehension in Toni Morrison’s *Song of Solomon*”

“An Excursion into the Black World: The ‘Seven Days’ in Toni Morrison’s *Song of Solomon*”

With or without the colon, all of these titles operate in roughly the same way. They include the name of the work they address, and all but one include the author’s name as well. Each of them attaches the book’s title to the specific topic the paper will explore. Some other titles will use a short quotation to add interest to a title, such as this one (from the second page of search results): “‘Every Goodbye Ain’t Gone’: The Semiotics of Death, Mourning, and Closural Practice in Toni Morrison’s *Song of Solomon*.”

With or without the colon, each of these titles helps the potential reader understand why they might want to keep reading.

Real Writing from Real Students: Titles

Absurdity in "Araby" and "Marie":
Existentialism Across the Ages

Devil in a Blue Dress and Black Homeownership

Power Plays of Hitchcock's *Vertigo*

Props Portraying Racial Significance in *Devil in a Blue Dress*

“Walk out the door in the morning, Easy, and you're mixed up in something”: Archways in *Devil in a Blue Dress*

7 Steps, Not Examples: On the Five-Paragraph Essay

Many of my students encounter this problem: they learn a method of writing five-paragraph essays in high school, then someone (often a college teacher) tells them to leave the five-paragraph essay behind, but nobody explains *why*. The five-paragraph approach seems simple and useful. What's wrong with it?

In some ways, nothing is wrong. The five-paragraph structure grows out of an admirable attention to the reader's needs. The first paragraph tells the reader your main point, along with three examples that support the point. The three examples become three body paragraphs, each offering evidence in support of the example. The fifth paragraph is a conclusion that, more or less, repeats the big idea of the introduction. On the whole, that formula allows you to bring your reader into your topic, to provide a clear path through your supporting ideas, and to wrap everything up neatly.

Analytical writing of many kinds shares a similar kind of structure: introduction, supporting sections, conclusion. All good! If you've learned those structural elements through the five-paragraph essay, you'll see them again and again in analytical writing. Even academic books, which consist of many hundreds of paragraphs, have similar sections: most feature an introduction, a series of body chapters, and a conclusion or afterword.

So what's the problem?

Five-paragraph essays run into trouble when they employ examples rather than steps of analysis. A five-paragraph essay's introduction might sound something like this:

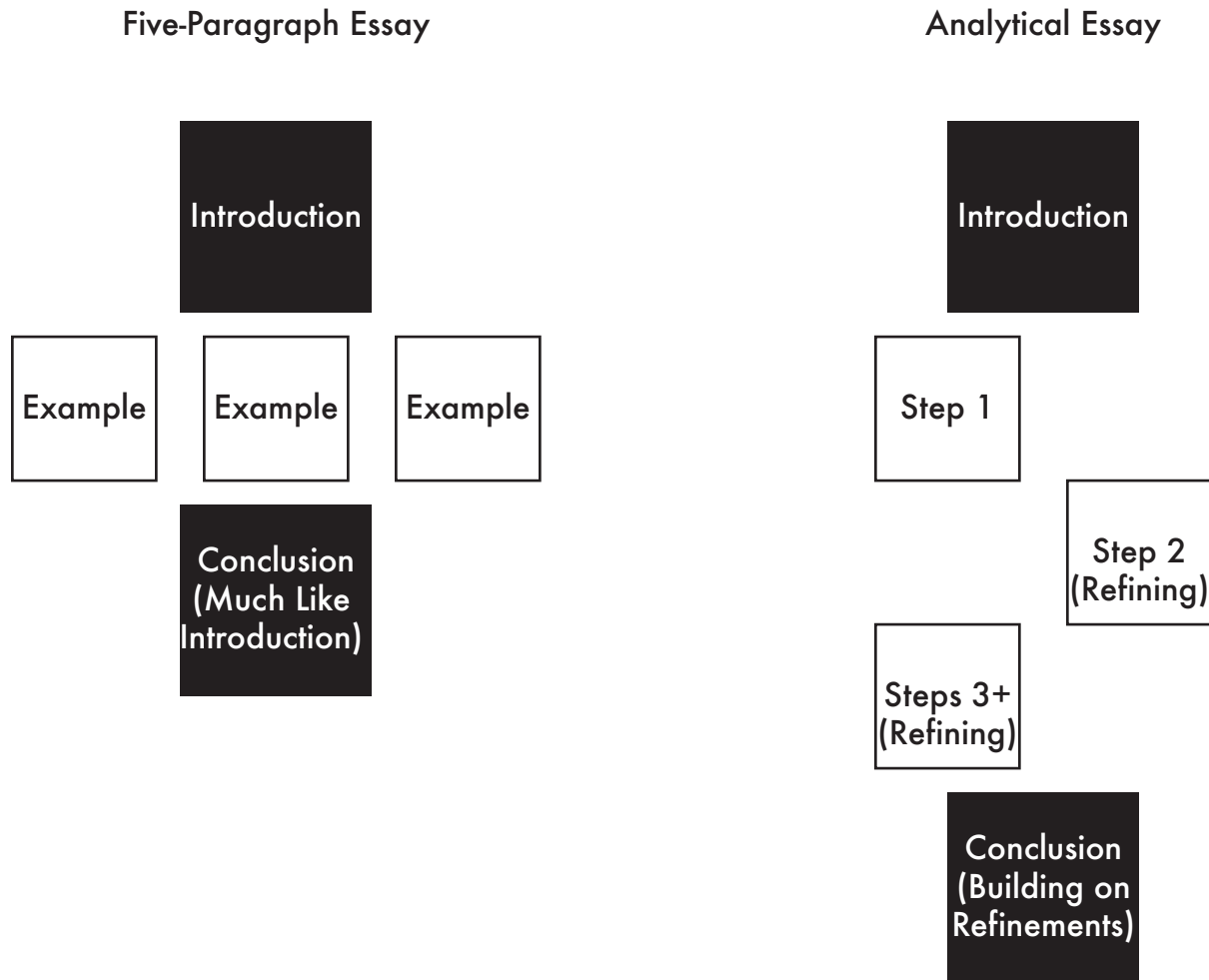
Throughout history, humans have experienced death. Death is therefore a prominent theme in many literary works. One of the most remarkable literary works about death is William Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. In *Hamlet*, there are many kinds of death, such as death by combat, death by suicide, and accidental death. This paper will examine each of those means of dying to show that death is an important theme of *Hamlet*.

I'm exaggerating the five-paragraph approach to emphasize the problems with this kind of essay. The writer of this piece is certainly correct: death is indeed an important theme of *Hamlet*! However, everybody who has read even a quick plot summary of the play already knows that. Spending the body paragraphs of the paper giving examples will not change the fundamental, broad point about the importance of death, and that would be true even in a longer paper that offered more examples. Any one example demonstrates the theme, so even a hundred paragraphs talking about death in different ways would not add anything to the reader's understanding of the play. Every example simply points back to the same big, vague idea.

Instead, an effective analytical piece will begin with details—start small, start strange!—and build an argument from steps of analysis. Take, for example, Stephen Greenblatt's book *Hamlet in Purgatory*, which is about, of all things, *Hamlet* and death. Greenblatt uses the techniques of close reading to ask questions about small, strange details of *Hamlet*. For instance, when the ghost of Hamlet's father appears, why is he dressed the way he is? What does it mean that his body does

not show signs of decay? How does his speech reflect Early Modern beliefs about the afterlife? Because his argument starts small and strange, Greenblatt can use his historical research to create a fascinating portrayal of *Hamlet's* place in cultural and religious debates of its time, moving step by step through its evidence.

You can visualize the difference between these two models like this:



They both involve an introduction, supporting sections, and then a conclusion. Your reader will expect that structure in some form, and if you learned it through the idea of the five-paragraph essay, super. In college-level analytical writing, however, you will want to deploy that structure through steps of analysis, starting with carefully observed details and working towards concluding thoughts. You can then use the conclusion to reflect on the introduction, helping the reader understand how you can think about your key ideas more deeply as a result of walking through the details of your analysis. Using steps rather than examples makes the journey worthwhile.

8 Thanks to Student Writers

I owe deep thanks to the following students, who kindly agreed to share their work in this guide to assist in the learning of future students. I appreciate their generous willingness to allow their words to be used here. Each student is acknowledged with the form of their name that they chose to list.

Jemzy Alabi

Tamar Breines

Maddie Church

Rowan Divadeenam

Saya Geisendorfer

Baily Isaak

Jiangnan

Grace Kim

Aiden Klass

Nora Kohnhorst

Salil Kumar

Alexis Mendoza

Sheilla Muligande

Pallavi

Yudora Petraitis

Hannah Pierce

Antoni Staszekiewicz

Bella Totten

Tram

Bella Villarreal

Jackson Waters

Rachel Werner

Zoe Zappas

Chicago NB (Notes & Bibliography) Style: A Quick Reference

Why Do We Do This?

Scholarship happens in community. Careful citation serves three functions:

- it allows you to thank the community of writers and creators that you have consulted in your writing;
- it preserves academic integrity by specifying your sources; and
- it enables the further growth of the scholarly community by helping your readers locate and use the sources that you have found helpful.

And Why Do We Do It This Way?

Following the rules of a citation style carefully helps citation do its work. Sloppy or incomplete citation often prevents your reader from understanding what sources you have used or how they might follow your footsteps. I realize that the rules can seem excessively picky and detail-oriented. Isn't it enough if your reader understands basically what you were doing?

Well, sometimes. But other times, the details matter; in my own scholarly research, I have run into frustrating situations when I can't find a source or a passage because of someone else's sloppy citation, and I have been grateful that good editors have occasionally prevented me from making similar mistakes in my own work.

Citation styles such as Chicago, MLA, and APA remove the guesswork. You don't have to wonder what information your reader might need because the rules of the style have made those decisions for you. And when you follow the rules, a scholar who knows the style will be able to understand your references quickly and effectively. You speak the language of the scholarly community.

Chicago NB style provides good practice in using footnotes and constructing a bibliography. (The "NB" stands for "Notes and Bibliography.") Many of the leading journals in literary studies use this style. I ask you to use only Chicago NB style not because I think it is the best in some way but because using a style requested by a teacher or editor is itself a valuable skill. I have used that skill all the time in my life as a scholar, of course—for my publications, I have had to apply many variations of many styles, often with detailed instructions specific to a publishing house. But writing in many other situations will also require you to use a "house style" of citation; the quirkiest one I ever learned was for my job at an insurance company! My training in English prepared me for that challenge, too.

How Should I Use These Examples?

These examples provide models for using Chicago NB style to cite some of the most common kinds of sources. You can copy the format of these citations to create your own. You may also encounter other kinds of sources or individual sources that raise specific questions or problems. In those cases, you can try finding more information from online guides to Chicago NB style, or you can ask me for help. I am always happy to answer questions that help you manage citations correctly.

Sample Paper Introduction

Stu Dent

English 120: Literary Analysis

Professor Simpson

April 1, 2038

First footnote! Chicago NB style uses notes AND a bibliography; that's the "NB" in the name. The combination helps the reader by making it easy to understand your source in two different ways: first, attached to the point where you use it in the paper, and second, as part of an alphabetized list at the end.

Not (Only) *The Onion*:
Samuel Beckett's Blank Spaces

In 2006, *The Onion* published a memorable nugget of literary satire under the title "Scholars Discover 23 Blank Pages That May As Well Be Lost Samuel Beckett Play."¹ The force of the satire comes from its close kinship to non-satirical commentaries on literary minimalism. The piece in *The Onion* calls the blank pages "a natural progression from his earlier works, including 1969's *Breath*, a play with no characters, and 1972's *Not I*, in which the only illuminated part of the stage is a single mouth."² Writing in the *New York Times* in 1986, John Barth writes that "in 20th-century literature the minimalist succession leads through Hemingway's 'new theory' to the shorter fictions of Luis Borges and the ever-tenser texts of Samuel Beckett, perhaps culminating in his play *Quad* (1969)."³ *The Onion* shifts from standard literary history to satire by taking one small step along a well-worn path. In doing so, it participates in satire's traditional ability to challenge a shared sense of normal conduct from which vice and folly were seen to stray—a sense of normality that involves plays with certain kinds of characters, settings, and so forth.⁴ Does Beckett's minimalism really bring his plays close to meaninglessness, as the satire suggest? To investigate that question, this essay will explore the connection between stillness and thought in Beckett, ultimately proposing that his late plays—contrary to the implications of the satire—imply methods of political resistance in their progression away from conventional dialogue.

Footnote marks come at the end of sentences, and come after punctuation, including quotation marks.

The first two footnotes cite the same source, so the second one can be shortened. Instead of repeating all the information from the first citation, it uses the shortened form, and the reader who wants all the details can look for the first citation or go straight to the bibliography.

¹ "Scholars Discover 23 Blank Pages That May As Well Be Lost Samuel Beckett Play," *The Onion*, April 26, 2006, <https://www.theonion.com/scholars-discover-23-blank-pages-that-may-as-well-be-lo-1819568421>.

² "Scholars Discover 23 Blank Pages," *The Onion*.

³ John Barth, "A Few Words about Minimalism," *New York Times*, December 28, 1986, <https://www.nytimes.com/1986/12/28/books/a-few-words-about-minimalism.html> (accessed July 1, 2032).

⁴ *Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms*, s.v. "satire," accessed June 27, 2038, <https://www-oxfordreference-com.grinnell.idm.oclc.org/view/10.1093/acref/9780198715443.001.0001/acref-9780198715443-e-1014?rskey=uVQ1cb&result=1>.

The formatting is a little different here! The first obvious change is that the last name comes first, as opposed to the "John Barth" at the beginning of the footnote version.

Bibliography

The formatting of the heading is simple: just the word "Bibliography," centered, with no other special formatting.

Barth, John. "A Few Words about Minimalism." *New York Times*. December 28, 1986,

<https://www.nytimes.com/1986/12/28/books/a-few-words-about-minimalism.html>

(accessed July 1, 2032).

The Onion, "Scholars Discover 23 Blank Pages That May As Well Be Lost Samuel Beckett Play,"

April 26, 2006, <https://www.theonion.com/scholars-discover-23-blank-pages-that-may-as-well-be-lo-1819568421>.

Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms, s.v. "satire," accessed June 27, 2038,

[https://www-oxfordreference-](https://www-oxfordreference-com.grinnell.idm.oclc.org/view/10.1093/acref/9780198715443.001.0001/acref-9780198715443-e-1014?rskey=uVQ1cb&result=1)

[com.grinnell.idm.oclc.org/view/10.1093/acref/9780198715443.001.0001/acref-](https://www-oxfordreference-com.grinnell.idm.oclc.org/view/10.1093/acref/9780198715443.001.0001/acref-9780198715443-e-1014?rskey=uVQ1cb&result=1)

[9780198715443-e-1014?rskey=uVQ1cb&result=1](https://www-oxfordreference-com.grinnell.idm.oclc.org/view/10.1093/acref/9780198715443.001.0001/acref-9780198715443-e-1014?rskey=uVQ1cb&result=1).

This formatting is called a "hanging indent." The first line of the entry is all the way to the left margin, and the rest of the lines are indented. This setup makes it easy for the reader to see where each entry begins.

Citation of Common Source Types

Book by a Single Author

First Footnote

¹ Firstname Lastname, *Title of Book* (Publisher, Year of publication), page number.

¹ Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (Routledge, 1992), 4.

Subsequent Footnotes

After the first note, you can use shorter versions. The full Chicago style sometimes uses two different ways of shortening, but for my classes, you can go straight to the abbreviated style of just the author's last name, short title, and page number:

² Pratt, *Imperial Eyes*, 9.

Bibliography Entry

Lastname, Firstname. *Title of Book*. Publisher, Year of publication.

Pratt, Mary Louise. *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation*. Routledge, 1992.

Shorter Work (Article, Chapter, Story, Poem) in a Collection or Anthology

First Footnote

¹ Author First and Last Name, "Title of Chapter in Title Case," in *Title of Book in Title Case and Italics*, ed. Editor1 and Editor2 (Publisher, year), page[s].

¹ Daniel R. Schwarz, "Gabriel Conroy's Psyche: Character as Concept in Joyce's 'The Dead,'" in *The Dead: A Case Study in Contemporary Criticism*, ed. Daniel R. Schwarz (Bedford, 1993), 107.

Subsequent Footnotes

² Schwarz, "Gabriel Conroy's Psyche," 113.

Bibliography Entry

Author Last Name, Author First Name. "Title of Chapter in Title Case." In *Title of Book in Title Case and Italics*, edited by Editor1 and Editor2, starting page of chapter—ending page of chapter. Publisher, year.

Schwarz, Daniel R. "Gabriel Conroy's Psyche: Character as Concept in Joyce's 'The Dead.'" In *The Dead: A Case Study in Contemporary Criticism*, edited by Daniel R. Schwarz, 102-24. Bedford, 1993.

Article in a Scholarly Journal

First Footnote

¹ Author First and Last Name, “Title of Article in Title Case,” *Title of Journal in Title Case and Italics* volume number, no. xxx (Month and year): page[s].

¹ Emer Nolan, “‘The Tommy Moore Touch’: Ireland and Modernity in Joyce and Moore,” *Dublin James Joyce Journal* 2 (2009): 64-77.

Note: in this example, the journal has only a volume number and year (no issue number or publication month), so the entry includes only the available details.

Subsequent Footnotes

² Last Name, “Shortened Title,” page[s] of specific citation.

² Nolan, “‘The Tommy Moore Touch,’” 67.

Bibliography Entry

Author Last Name, Author First Name. “Title of Article in Title Case.” *Title of Journal in Title Case and Italics* volume number, no. xxx (Month and year published): starting page of article–ending page of article.

Nolan, Emer. “‘The Tommy Moore Touch’: Ireland and Modernity in Joyce and Moore.” *Dublin James Joyce Journal* 2 (2009): 64-77.

Note: in this example, the journal has only a volume number and year (no issue number or publication month), so the entry includes only the available details.

Film in Online Format

First Footnote

¹ *Title of Film in Title Case and Italics*, directed by Director (year originally released), medium or DOI or URL.

¹ *North by Northwest*, directed by Alfred Hitchcock (1959), SWANK Digital Campus.

Subsequent Footnotes

² *North by Northwest*.

Bibliography Entry

Director Last Name, Director First Name, dir. *Title of Film in Title Case and Italics*. Year originally released; Publisher, year published of the copy you are using. Medium **or** DOI **or** URL.

Hitchcock, Alfred, dir. *North by Northwest*. 1959. SWANK Digital Campus.

Article in a Newspaper (Online Source)

First Footnote

¹ Author First and Last Name, "Title of Article in Title Case," *Title of Newspaper*, Month Day, Year. url (accessed Month Day, Year).

¹ John Barth, "A Few Words about Minimalism," *New York Times*, December 28, 1986, <https://www.nytimes.com/1986/12/28/books/a-few-words-about-minimalism.html> (accessed July 1, 2032).

Subsequent Footnotes

² Last Name, "Shortened Title."

² Barth, "A Few Words."

Bibliography Entry

Author Last Name, Author First Name. "Title of Article in Title Case." *Title of Newspaper*, Month Day, Year. url (accessed Month Day, Year).

Barth, John. "A Few Words about Minimalism." *New York Times*. December 28, 1986, <https://www.nytimes.com/1986/12/28/books/a-few-words-about-minimalism.html> (accessed July 1, 2032).

Entry in an Online Reference Source

Note: "s.v." in the following entries stands for the Latin "sub verbo," meaning "under the word"; you use it to say which entry you used in the reference source. For more details on print and web sources, as well as reference sources that have article authors, see [this page](#) from Simon Fraser University.

First Footnote

¹ *Name of Reference Source*, s.v. "term," access date, URL.

¹ *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. "ostensible," accessed June 27, 2021, <https://www-oed-com.grinnell.idm.oclc.org/view/Entry/133097>.

Subsequent Footnotes

² "Ostensible," *Oxford English Dictionary*.

Bibliography Entry

Name of Reference Source, s.v. "term," access date, URL.

Oxford English Dictionary, s.v. "ostensible," accessed June 27, 2021, <https://www-oed-com.grinnell.idm.oclc.org/view/Entry/133097>.

Web Page (No Author)

First Footnote

¹ “Title, Section, or Page Name in Title Case,” Organization, full date given on page, URL.

¹ “Scholars Discover 23 Blank Pages That May As Well Be Lost Samuel Beckett Play,” *The Onion*, April 26, 2006, <https://www.theonion.com/scholars-discover-23-blank-pages-that-may-as-well-be-lo-1819568421>.

Subsequent Footnotes

² “Scholars Discover 23 Blank Pages,” *The Onion*.

Bibliography Entry

Organization. “Title, Section, or Page Name in Title Case.” Full date given on page. URL.

The Onion. “Scholars Discover 23 Blank Pages That May As Well Be Lost Samuel Beckett Play.” April 26, 2006. <https://www.theonion.com/scholars-discover-23-blank-pages-that-may-as-well-be-lo-1819568421>.