

## Mastering Literary Analysis – Week 5

### Writing Strong Body Paragraphs

Before we work more on writing essays as a whole, we need to master the body paragraph. If you cannot write a strong body paragraph, you cannot write a strong essay. Body paragraphs do the majority of work in an essay. They are the paragraphs in which you actually make your argument. You can think of the body paragraphs as stairs to your thesis: Your thesis is the destination, the place you want your reader to "land." The body paragraphs get your reader to that landing, step by step, argument by argument.

A body paragraph makes an *argument*: it proves one, single claim. A body paragraph is, then, in a sense an essay in miniature. Just as your essay as a whole proves one, single claim, so the body paragraph proves one, single claim on the way to that larger claim.

**There are four main parts to a body paragraph:**

- sub-thesis (or thesis if the paragraph is the whole essay, as in the case of a "paragraph essay")
- evidence (primarily quotes)
- analysis/explanation
- transition (or conclusion)

**Sub-thesis** - This is the main claim that *everything* in the paragraph is supporting and proving. It needs to make a focused claim about the text which can reasonably be argued in ½ a page to a page (that would be the proper scope for a paragraph).

**Evidence** - Evidence is mostly quotes which directly and clearly support the claim of your sub-thesis. You need to think of what "point" support your sub-thesis; rather like, when outlining an entire essay, you need to think of what "steps" will lead your reader to the thesis (these become your body paragraphs), so in a body paragraph, think about what "steps" you need to go through to demonstrate that your claim is true. **A body paragraph generally has two to four quotes.** Quotes should be appropriately brief, focusing *just* on the narrow portions of the text that best prove your point. **Block quotes (over three lines of poetry or four of prose) should be saved for only the most necessary of occasions. Most papers *do not need block quotes*.** Contextualizing summary and quote introduction phrases are part of the "evidence" portion of a paragraph.

**Analysis/explanation** – These words are synonymous. In this part of a body paragraph, you explain how the evidence proves your main claim (sub-thesis). Quotes typically need at least two sentences of explanation. Explanation should be the *longest* section of your paragraph. Quotes are not self-explanatory; if they are, your claim is probably very weak and mostly factual. Remember that the job of a

good claim is to make what is *implicit* (merely shown rather than directly stated) in a book *explicit*.

**Transition (or conclusion)** – Remember the metaphor of body paragraphs as steps in a stair. The final, brief part of a paragraph shows how the ideas of this paragraph relate to the next; it shows what the logical connection is so that the reader smoothly "steps" from one idea to the next. In the case of a paragraph essay, the final sentence or two will be that of conclusion, a final affirmation of the significance and truth of the thesis.

**There are two main ways of organizing or structuring a body paragraph using these four parts:**

**Quote-analysis-quote-analysis**

This is the most common way of organizing a paragraph and probably what you have been taught before. In this method, after you have begun your paragraph with your thesis and any brief introductory material, you give your first piece of evidence and then you explain it. Then you give your next piece of evidence and explain it. Then you give your next piece of evidence and explain it. etc.

**Four-part paragraph**

This way of organizing a body paragraph is more sophisticated and a bit harder to master than the previous way, but it can push you to write a more nuanced argument. In this format, all the evidence is grouped together—you present the quotes, properly introduced and contextualized, together in a single "block" and then explain them one by one.

**Examples of body paragraphs:**

The following examples all use the four-part paragraph organizational method because this is typically the least familiar to students. None of these paragraphs are perfect, and you can note ways that the fairly strong ones could still be improved. Please save this handout and refer back to these examples (and the above information) as you write this semester.

I hope you all have read *Beowulf* at this point, but I hope that you can follow along the evidence and claims being made regardless. Pay attention to the structure of the paragraphs and how the quotes are explained. The thesis/sub-thesis in each paragraph is underlined, the evidence is *italicized*, and the explanation/analysis is in a regular format.

***Fairly Weak Paragraph*** (the main claim is significant but is rather too broad; evidence is relevant and analysis makes strong observations but the analysis does not directly explain the evidence; argument generally needs expansion and focus):

The imagery of light and dark symbolizes hope and faith within the people that stands against the evil and sins of the world. *Grendel represents the evil and sins of the world, for "after night-fall, Grendel set out [and] ... suddenly the God-cursed brute was creating havoc" (9-11). Grendel's destructive acts against Heorot and its people incline the victims*

of these gruesome attacks to have faith, and they believed “God can easily halt these raids and harrowing attacks” (33). Grendel, the descendent of Cain, symbolizes the darkness and evil of the world for his actions and attacks bring about agony, despair, and death [how?]. The darkness, however, brings about hope, faith, and trust which is the light the victims of darkness use to stand up against that terrorizing darkness [but how do you know that their faith is what stops the raids?]. These victims use their faith in God to fight against the dark and evil, to protect the light inside of each of them [what do you mean by this inner light? How do you know it’s relevant to the story?]. The people’s hope and faith used to stand up against the evil of the world is symbolized by the light and dark images of *Beowulf*.

**Adequate Paragraph** (has a clear claim which needs further clarification; evidence is thorough but needs pruning to only the essential elements; the evidence points out and explains significant details but still doesn’t always show how claims are directly demonstrated by evidence):

The lake in which Beowulf fights Grendel’s Mother is dark and infested, expressing the contamination which evil brings [what do you mean by contamination?], and the light described when Grendel’s Mother dies symbolizes purity. When Beowulf hunts down Grendel’s Mother he sets out for the mere. “The forest paths were marred all over with the monster’s tracks, her trail on the ground wherever she had gone across the dank moors.... The bloodshot water surged underneath” (98-99) [you don’t directly discuss the beginning of this quote--is it necessary?]. Beowulf follows Grendel’s mother to the depths of this dark, murky lake, filled with the blood of lost Danes. “The water was infested with all kinds of reptiles. There were writing sea-dragons and monsters slouching on slopes near the cliff, serpents and wild things” (99) [you don’t directly discuss this quote]. When Beowulf heads into the unknown lake to chase down Grendel’s Mother it is described as a “hellish turn-hole” (105), paralleling this lake to a dark and bloody hell [what other imagery connects it with hell?]. When Beowulf finally defeats Grendel’s mother, “a light appeared and the place brightened the way the sky does when heaven’s candle is shining clearly” (109). Before Beowulf kills off Grendel’s Mother it is contaminated with evil spirits. It is described as “dark” and the water as “bloodshot.” There are serpents and evil creatures lurking around the lake, contrasting them to Satan, and thus evil [how so?]. The scariest part of the lake, however, is the unknown nature of it. There is a sense of uncertainty within it because you cannot see the bottom. The filthiness of the water is allegorized as unclean, secretive, and deceptive, drawing a certain parallel to hell [how?]. However, once this hellish monster is defeated the place “brightened up.” The radiant light described in the book symbolizes purity. The lake reveals that there is nothing to hide, by its cleanness [how do you see this?]. There are no evil thoughts or spirits lurking around the lake because it is entirely clean [where was the evidence for this?]. In this sense the lake has a fond purity to it like “heaven’s candle shining clearly.” Only goodness is manifested within the lake, and like purity [what is meant by purity?] the vault is beautiful and liberated once it is set free from evil spirits. Thus, the overarching theme of dark before Grendel’s mother’s death and the light after expresses the contamination of evil and the radiance of a pure heart.

**Fairly Strong Paragraph** (Strong thesis which needs to be made more specific through better word choice; evidence is extremely thorough and is worded to emphasize significant details in the passages; evidence for the most part directly discusses evidence given but there is room for improvement in transitions and direct demonstration. Some helpful details were overlooked, but one can never include everything in a paragraph—one has to include the best evidence.)

In *Beowulf*, the imagery of light and dark symbolizes the relationship between the “good” of Beowulf and the “evil” of Grendel’s mother [perhaps choose more specific words than “good” and “evil” so that you don’t have to use quotes. For example, this paragraph could be made stronger by showing that the poet is associating Beowulf with Christ and Grendel’s mother with Satan. This is more specific than “good” and “evil” and would also help you sort which details are most important]. In order to avenge the death of Aeschere, Beowulf journeys to the mere, the home of Grendel’s family in order to end once and for all their feud. The mere was a dangerous place: “at night there, something uncanny happens: the water burns” (95). Once Beowulf and his men reached the mere “they came upon Aeschere’s head at the foot of the cliff” (99). They kept moving forward and finally arrived at the swampy lair of Grendel’s mother. Upon arriving at the mere they witness Aeschere’s decapitated head resting at the foot of a cliff. Beowulf “dived into the heaving depths of the lake” and fought the savage beast (103). This was no easy fight, he was captured and crushed by the mother but “the mesh of the chain-mail saved him on the outside” (105). In the end, Beowulf reigned victorious over Grendel’s mother and he sliced off her head. Once she was dead “a light appeared and the place brightened the way the sky does when heaven’s candle is shining clearly. ... The lake settled, clouds darkened above the bloodshot depths” (109,113). Aeschere’s head symbolizes the entrance to evil terrain and death. The mere is described as an evil place, even the water burns, associating it with hell. Water is commonly attributed to purification and good, but this water is defiled with blood and burns hellishly. Grendel’s mother is told to be living in this fiery swamp which represents her purely evil and hellish spirit. Beowulf jumps into her “lair” in order to fight Grendel’s mother. Water is below the level of ground just like hell is below the ground, therefore Beowulf diving into the water is really a representation of him entering the depths of hell and going to battle the devil. As Beowulf goes underwater we can see the appearance of light. [need a transition between these two sentences] While the warrior fights darkness he wears chainmail to protect him from being crushed by the pressure and grip of Grendel’s mother. The chainmail symbolizes God’s presence and safety throughout the clash of good and evil [how do you see this in the book?]. Religion and loyalty were both major components of Anglo-Saxon culture; they believed that God was their savior and that he would always be loyal to them and protect them through evils, just as God was there for Beowulf and protected him from injuries [show me in the book how you know that this is relevant here]. [again, transition] Once he finally killed her a light shone down. This light expressed the ascension of goodness and prosperity back on the earth and an end to the feud. Finally as Beowulf takes off his armor, the poem gives an image of the water settling which represents the peace which has arisen from the death of the Grendel family. Beowulf and his men entered the mere when it was filled with evil but upon killing Grendel’s mother they were able to destroy evil or “the dark” and restore peace, “the light.”

- [Other details which would have been useful to include: the ancient, antediluvian sword, the fact that Beowulf’s sword melts, the time of day he rises back to the surface, the fact that his men all think that he has died]