

Mastering Literary Analysis – Week 7

Essay Structure: Intros & Conclusions

Basic Intro Structure - This is not a formula. This is not the only way to structure an introduction, but it is a helpful, initial method to get you started. Think of it as training wheels; once you learn to balance on your own, you can get more creative, but for now, you have this.

- **1) Introduce your problem** (sometimes called a "hook"). An essay is a solution to a problem, so you need to make your reader "feel" the problem.
 - Though it might make sense to introduce a general problem (for example, people in general putting their own needs above the community), it is usually better to dive directly into the book—show me the problem in the book (character x's conflict between his own desires and the good of his wife).
- **2) Show how the problem/solution plays out in the story** - You can think of this as a "roadmap"; give your reader an overview of how you see the problem playing out in the story. This is often a kind of summary of the argument you make in the essay.
- **3) Thesis** - The thesis usually works best at the end of your intro, but sometimes it can also work before the "roadmap." The thesis is the single-sentence statement of the claim you are arguing in your paper, the solution of the problem. You can also think of the thesis as the "destination" of your paper: each paragraph will lead, step-by-step, to the thesis, to the final solution to the problem.
 - **Reminder:** A strong thesis makes a clear, strong, significant claim. It "tells" something that the story only "shows"—it makes *explicit* something that is *implicit* in the story. If your thesis (or any other claim) merely summarizes what the book directly says, it is not really a claim but merely a summary.***

Conclusion

- In some ways, the conclusion is the least important part of your paper. If you have not convinced your reader at this point that you have a solid, significant argument, you are certainly not going to do it in the conclusion. On the other hand, since this is the *last* impression your reader will have of your argument, it is a very important part of your paper in leaving your reader with a strong sense that you have real insight to offer.
- The Basic Summary Conclusion – You have probably been taught this kind of conclusion before: You summarize your argument and end (or begin) with your thesis. Often, in middle school, students are taught this kind of conclusion as part of the five-part paragraph essay. This kind of conclusion is extremely boring. If you haven't convinced your reader of your argument, you are not going to do so here. If you have done a good job of making your argument clear, repeating yourself in the conclusion is mere redundancy. While the summary conclusion is a decent tool to fall back upon in moments of crisis, it is never the best tool at hand.
- So what, then, does a good conclusion do? It is a tricky thing, more an art than a science. A good conclusion leads your reader to new ideas—not *entirely* new ideas (you don't want to be writing an entirely new essay), but new horizons for the central idea of your essay or new applications of it. The conclusion can be a good place to bring in that third level of

questioning: Most strong literary analysis essays are focusing primarily on the second level—how the *details* are working together to create meaning. In the conclusion paragraph, you can now bring home to your reader why that meaning matters. How might the central insight of your paper apply to human life generally or open up new questions about why we should read books? Again, a really strong conclusion is an art, not a science, and you have to be willing to take a few risks to learn how to write a good one.

- If you are stumped for ideas for your conclusion as you outline (and I, the writer of this handout, generally am), be on the lookout as you write your essay for that sudden thought: "oh wow! I wish I could write about x! But then I'd have to rewrite my paper;" or, "This reminds me of y;" or, "I wonder how this relates to z in the same book/life." Often thoughts like this are what lead to a strong and interesting conclusion topic.

*****A reminder from Lesson 3 about theses: A strong thesis is a claim which makes *explicit* something that is *implicit* in the story.** This is really the whole job of analysis—to make explicit what is implicit. What does this mean? "Explicit" comes from the Latin word *explicare*—to unfold, to extend, to set forth. The "implicit" is something folded up, hidden. You might think of the difference between "showing" and "telling." At the end of "The Gift of the Magi," Henry gets "talky." He tells us some things about wisdom and foolishness, but even if he did not, the story itself—through the irony of the sacrifice and the losses—would *show* us his meaning, which is something like "true wisdom is to love someone else sacrificially." In "The Fly," Katherine Mansfield does some "telling" about time and grief, and she also "shows" us how this looks by giving us the picture of the boss torturing that fly and the fly getting up and again and again—until it can't. There is very little "telling" in either of the stories you read for today—almost none in "Gorilla, My Love" and only the very tiniest bit at the end of "Araby" in the narrator's contemplation of his feelings. **When you talk or write about literature, your job is to "tell" what the author only "shows."** If your discussion or your analysis merely restates what the author tells, you are not making an argument; you are merely summarizing.