



ANALYSIS OF PRIMARY TEXT SOURCES FOR LITERATURE ESSAYS

Recognizing evidence in a primary literary text

In order to effectively use a primary text, you need to be able to tell what constitutes evidence that you can build into your argument about the text. An effective essay about literature uses specific references from the primary text to support the argument. Here are some things that you can use as evidence from the literary text.

1. Dialogue

- Someone says something to someone else.
- Someone says something about someone else.
- Someone tells about an event he/she witnessed.

Never paraphrase what a person says in the text. Quotes let the character say it in his/her own words. This is a very effective strategy when you are building your argument. When quoting what a character says, be sure to place the quote in context. Tell the reader who said it, who the character said it to, when it was said in the story and what it is in reference to. Be like a journalist, and answer the six “wh” questions: who, what, where, when, why and how.

2. Narrative commentary

- Narrator/ author comments on events or actions of characters
- Narrator (3rd person narrative) tells reader what someone is thinking.
- Narrator (1st person narrative) tells reader what he/she is thinking.

The narrator in a literary text may have a different perspective than the author. Therefore, when quoting commentary, you need to keep the two entities separate. What is the author trying to say in this section, and what is the narrator saying? Is this a misapprehension of what is really happening in the text? Therefore, quotes rather than paraphrases or summaries are necessary for this type of information. After the quote, you should explain how it proves a point about a theme that is present in the whole text or how it shows the narrator’s frame of mind or bias.

3. Descriptions of

- A person
- A place or geographic location
- An object

It is often very useful to quote the exact words of a description from the primary text. This is because the words of the description are very carefully chosen to convey the mood or feelings of the characters who are observing the thing being described, or the mood that the author wishes to evoke for that particular scene. After the quote, tell the reader what the author is trying to prove with the description and which words show you that he/she is trying to prove this. When quoting a description of a person, place or thing, place this description in context. When was it described, why was it described in this way and who was observing it in this way?

4. Events

- The narrator describes an event
- Character in the narrative describes an event.

You may summarize, rather than quote, the events that happen in a literary text. However, be careful only to summarize those events that are directly related to the point you are making in your essay. Don't get lured into the trap of simply retelling the story of the text. What exactly does the event prove about the motivation, or feelings or character of the people involved in that event? What are the consequences of the actions of the people involved?

Gathering Evidence from a Primary Text

1. MINOR ORGANIZATION

- Look at all the evidence you have gathered and begin to put it all into related piles. This pre-organization technique will prevent you from using the same piece of evidence more than once in your essay, and will also help you get the best fit between the evidence and the point you are trying to make about the text.
- Create a working thesis: what theme seems to link all these points together and make them say something in answer to the assignment?

2. MAJOR ORGANIZATION

- Create an outline of your essay. This will involve organizing the piles according to the organizing principle that seems most appropriate. It could be according to chronology of the primary source, or according to importance, or perhaps as part of a comparison with another character or book.. However you decide to organize the points of your essay, make sure that that organization is apparent to the reader.
- Begin to write! Sometimes the best fit for all the pieces of information that you have gathered does not become apparent until you actually begin writing. Don't forget, though ---if you do change direction, make sure that your organization is still clear to the reader.

Incorporating the evidence into your essay

When inserting evidence into your essay, follow three guidelines of "fit, form and function"¹. This means, that you should use only those pieces of evidence that fit with the point you are

¹ Joanne Buckley, *Fit to Print* 5th Ed. Toronto: Harcourt. p.

trying to make; the form of the quote should fit with your own sentence structure; and the function of the quoted or summarized evidence is to support the point you are trying to make, not to say that point for you.

FIT

Formal technical terms: It is particularly important to choose your evidence carefully when you are discussing imagery, rhyme schemes and evocative language

Character Motivation: Characters act in a text for a variety of reasons. Therefore, you will need to find more than one piece of evidence in order to support any suppositions that you make about motivation. Select text that shows evidence of what they are thinking, or what others think about their actions or their motivations, and/or commentary by the author in order to prove motivation.

FORM

Every statement you make about an author or a text must be supported by evidence from the text. There are several forms that your evidence can take in the essay. You may paraphrase, use a direct short quote, a direct long quote, a quote within a quote (i.e. what the author says accompanied by some dialogue) or a small quoted phrase to support what you are saying about a text.

FUNCTION

All evidence that you use from the primary source must be direct, bounded and documented.

Direct: The best evidence is the evidence that is taken directly from the text. If you are trying to prove implications or interpretations, you must have something specific from the text that you are interpreting. Let the reader know exactly which words in which passage that you are referring to.

Bounded: You need to let the reader know where the author's ideas end and yours begin. There have to be explicit rhetorical boundaries between the two so that the reader is in no doubt about who is saying what. In the case of quotations, the quotation marks help form the boundaries but you also need to use words to form that boundary. At the beginning of the borrowed idea, let the readers know whose idea it is. Use introductions like: "Dickinson says", or "According to Smith," or "As Brown has noted" or "Keats points out that.". At the end of the summary or paraphrase, you should give your parenthetical documentation. This gives the reader the page reference and other information linking it to the Works Cited list.

Other useful verbs are:

insists	compares	notes	rejects
argues	confirms	observes	reports
admits	contends	points out	suggests
claims	declares	reasons	agrees
believes	denies	asserts	thinks

Documentation: Use MLA documentation format for your referencing within the text. Every quote, paraphrase and summary needs to have this citation information. Here are examples of in-text citations for a poem, a novel, a prose play, a play in verse, a quote within a quote or a short quoted phrase²:

² All examples are taken from *The Little, Brown Compact Handbook*, 2nd Canadian Edition., Ed. Jane E. Aaron, Murray McArthur (2003), Ed. Jane E. Aaron, Murray McArthur (2003).

A poem:

In Sonnet 73, Shakespeare writes, “In me thou seest the glowing of such fire/ That on the ashes of his youth doth lie” (9-10).

Please note that when you are only quoting 2 or 3 lines, that you may quote them as part of your prose line. However, you should still show line breaks.

A novel:

Toward the end of James’s novel, Maggie suddenly feels “the thick breath of the definite – which was the intimate, the immediate, the familiar, as she hadn’t had them for so long” (536; pt.6, ch.41).

For this particular quote, you need to give not only the page number, but also the part and chapter because it is such a long text.

A prose play:

In Thompson Highway’s The Rez Sisters, Pelajia expresses this sense of loss:

So what! And the old stories, the old language. Almost all gone...was a time Nanabush and Windigo and everyone could rattle away in Indian fast as Bingo Betty could lay her bingo chips down on a hot night. (5; act1)

For a prose play, the page number, scene and act number are needed in the parentheses. Notice that with a long quote, you simply indent the whole piece five spaces, but do not put quotation marks around it. Also, the period goes at the end of the sentence in long quote format, and not after the parentheses.

A play in verse:

Later, in King Lear, Shakespeare has the disguised Edgar say, “The prince of darkness is a gentleman” (3.4.147).

For a play in verse, you need to cite the act, scene and line number. Notice that the play’s name and the author form part of the introduction to the quote.

A quote within a quote:

Alfred Rosa says, “In ‘Heat’ by Archibald Lampman, the setting is a trance-like evocation of the Ontario landscape in summer” (353).

A short quoted phrase:

In “Heat”, Lampman depicts the road as a set of skeletal bones “white and bare” (1.2).