Writing a Literary Essay

Because they reflect universal human feelings and experiences, great works of literature transcend time. Yet every work of literature is shaped by the era in which it is produced. In this workshop you’ll write a **literary essay** that analyzes two works, one from the Ancient World or Anglo-Saxon compare/contrast with one from the Middle Ages to discuss how they explore the Warrior/Knight values of the time period.

Prewriting

Choose a Topic

From the pieces that we have read in class, you should select pieces that you feel comfortable discussing in terms of the Warrior/Knight values.

You may wish to create a Venn Diagram to help you identify similarities and differences between the two work.

Analyze Literary Works

**The Evidence Will Show…**

After you have identified three major elements that you will discuss, you should return to the text and find ample support (quotes with line numbers for the Ancient World and Beowulf or page numbers for the Middle Ages).

Through your research, you already know that your three works reflect the literary concepts of warriors and knights. Now you’ll demonstrate *how* each work reflects that specific quality. To do that, read each work critically, following the guidelines below.

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| **•** | First, as you read each work, ask yourself, “What **evidence** shows that this work illustrates the warrior/knight I’ve chosen?” Jot down your responses to this question. |
| **•** | Next, once you’ve read and responded to one work, analyze your responses to see what **major point** most of the evidence supports. |

When you’ve gone through this process for each work, you should have the major points you’ll discuss in your essay and the evidence supporting them.

In order to build an effective comparison and contrast, you should think of at least 2 quotes from each text for each point that you are discussion. Thus, this means you should have at a minimum 12 quotes to use for the three body paragraphs.

You might want to use a graphic organizer to help you organize your quotes.

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| Evidence | Major Point in Relation to topic |
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Write a Thesis Statement

**Tying the Knot** Now that you’ve analyzed each work and identified the major points you will discuss in your essay, you can tie those points together in a **thesis statement—**a sentence or two that expresses the main idea of your essay. Your thesis statement should also identify the literary period, the specific focus (which qualities of warrior/knight you will focus on), and the authors whose works you’ll discuss. Remember, it’s likely that you’ll revise your thesis statement—for reasons of content or style—by the time you write your final draft.

Ex. In Thomas Mallory’s *Le Morte de Arthur* and in Homer’s *The Illiad*, the authors exemplify the tragedies of the battlefield and how the combatants exemplify the elements of hubris, the height of the battle itself, and the consequences that result.

Elaborate on the Evidence

**Building Your Case** A compelling case in a literary essay consists of the major points that support your thesis, plus at least two pieces of **literary evidence** that support each major point. Use **precise and** **relevant examples** as support; however, don’t merely state a major point and then follow it with only literary evidence from the work in question. Instead,**elaborate** upon the evidence by interpreting it for your readers. In other words, explain precisely how the evidence supports the major point. Look at how one student structured part of his argument about Pope in the notes below. Notice how he wrote down a **parenthetical citation,** showing where in the work he found the quote; then, he elaborated on this literary evidence.

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| |  | | --- | | **Major Point:** Homer and Mallory highlight the failure of the warriors to heed advice, which foreshadows the downfall of Hector and King Arthur. |  |  | | --- | | **Literary Evidence:** In *The Illiad*, Hector ignores the evidence return to within the battle walls where “the others stay inside and cling to safety” (59) |  |  | | --- | | **Elaboration:** Hector recognizes that he is in danger, yet when he is reassured by the appearance of Dephobus (who is really Athena in disguise), he stays outside the walls and thus meets his fate. | |

Organize Your Essay

**Setting Forth**   Plan to **structure** your arguments and ideas in a sustained way. Since this essay deals with three works by different writers, plan to discuss one work at a time, starting with the one published first and ending with the one published last. By organizing the works chronologically, you can show how each not only reflects the literary trend you’re discussing, but also contributes to establishing that trend. Here is part of a student’s working outline for an essay on satire in the works of Swift, Pope, and Voltaire.

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| —Introduction  —Background information  —Thesis statement  —Elements of the warrior that lead to their downfall  —Major point     —First example of literary evidence         —Elaboration     —Second example of literary evidence         —Elaboration |

Writing a Literary Essay

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| A Writer’s Framework |
| **Introduction**   * Introduce the literary concepts of the Warrior/Knight and provide background information about that period relevant to your argument. * In a thesis statement, identify the concept of the warrior/knight, the 3 literary elements that you will focus on, and the authors discussed in the essay. |
| **Body: 3 Body Paragraphs**   * Develop the major points that support the thesis. * Use at least two pieces of fully elaborated literary evidence to support each point for each piece that you select. * Organize the essay according to specific traits. |
| **Conclusion**   * Restate, but don’t repeat, your thesis. * Close with a final observation on the literary works or on the literary period in terms of the concept of warrior/knight ideals. |