



## Essays - 4

# Essay About Literature

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 Each instructor develops her or his own assignments. Your instructor and the assignment sheet s/he has provided are the two best sources for guidance as you work toward a final draft. The handouts/tutorials for the types of essays feature general guidelines to help you write solid essays, but should be treated only as supplements to your instructor and the assignment sheet.

### Purpose


 To interpret a story or poem, probably using literary elements to explain why you understand the literature the way that you do.

### The Elements of Literature

(There are many; see our handout: Literary Elements)

 Plot – the events that take place in the work


Example: *Romeo and Juliet meet, fall in love, and marry. Juliet fakes her death. Romeo kills himself. Juliet kills herself.*

 Conflict – the oppositional relationship between a work's components, often identified broadly as a character vs. \_\_\_\_\_ (nature, herself, another character, fate, society, etc.)

Example: *Romeo and Juliet are in love, but their families hate each other.*

 Characters – the people who populate a work

Example: *Romeo, Juliet, the various Montagues and Capulets, the Friar*


 Imagery – the specific “visuals” used by an author or poet to achieve certain effects

Example: *The balcony scene. Juliet's death.*

 Symbolism – objects, characters, or images that represent other, more abstract ideas

Example: *A famous speech that Mercutio delivers in the play presents Queen Mab as a tiny, fanciful symbol of the minute, unreal nature of love and other “dreams.”*

### Topic

 Try to find a story or poem that you respond to personally, and especially one that you understand confidently.

### Thesis

Interpret what the work “says” about a certain theme. Attribute this message to the author.

Example: *In Romeo and Juliet, Shakespeare shows that tragedy can result from feuds.*

## Audience

- 👉 Take for granted that your audience has read the story or poem. Assume that your audience understands what happens in the work, but is interested to find out how you interpret it. You probably need to work for a deeper interpretation than the above example thesis, which is pretty elementary.

## Specifics

- 👉 As you defend your claim, use specific examples from the text without overloading your paper. Remember, the most important feature of this essay is your analysis of the story.

Example: *The play begins by establishing the conflict between the Montagues and Capulets, who “[f]rom ancient grudge break to new mutiny” (line 3). In Act 3, scene 1, the feud between the two families turns violent as Tybalt kills Mercutio and Romeo avenges his friend’s death by killing Tybalt. Romeo’s response to these events—“I am fortune’s fool”—indicate the degree to which the violence is associated with a familial conflict that predates and predominates Romeo’s life (3.1.142).*

## Structure

- 👉 You will probably structure this essay according to the literary elements you use to discuss the work. You will also want to organize your argument according to the ideas that constitute your thesis. Break up the pieces of your thesis statement to see what its individual components are, then consider how you need to order them.

Example: *If my thesis is that the feud leads to tragedy, I should establish that the feud exists before I discuss the tragedy it causes.*

- 👉 Using the literary element “conflict” to establish the presence of that feud is probably the best choice.
- 👉 To discuss the tragedy part of my thesis, I might go with “image.” I can discuss the specifics of both Romeo and Juliet’s deaths to show that Shakespeare uses images to communicate the tragedy of the play.

## Notes

- 👉 Write about events in the story or poem using present-tense verbs. Everything that happens in a text is discussed as though it is perpetually taking place in the present.
- 👉 Be sure to identify the title and author of the piece.
- 👉 Do not summarize the work unless you have been asked to. The focus is on the specific pieces of the work that you think best illustrate why you interpret it the way you do.  
Read the work several times. After you have read it all the way through at least once, think about what it means and what you have to say about it. Then, read it again. Once you are pretty set on your interpretation, read it again and underline or highlight portions that are particularly relevant to your interpretation. Then read it again.

For more information on this topic see  
Chapter 7 in *The Longwood Guide*.

Shakespeare, William. *Romeo and Juliet*. Project Gutenberg. Project Gutenberg, Nov. 1997. Web. 3 Aug. 2010.