

Ten Guidelines for Writing about Literature*

Choose a topic that promises a discovery. An image or passage that you find fascinating, puzzling, or troubling will be your best choice for a strong paper, as your curiosity will lead you to tease your topic beyond the obvious or merely “interesting.” For instance, it is interesting that both Janie of Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and Jay Gatsby of F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby* abandon their childhood identities, and it is interesting to compare and contrast them, but my topic will have potential for development only when I answer the question “So what?” What are the consequences of this reading? What do we **learn** when we pay attention to this aspect?

Build context for your reader (imagine someone who hasn’t read the book recently) by introducing the title(s) and author(s) in the first lines of your paper. Underline or *italicize* book titles (use only one method) and place titles of stories, poems, essays, and articles in “quotation marks.” The first time you mention the book (or story or article), use the complete title and full name of the author (F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby*). Thereafter, use the author’s last name only and, if you wish, an abbreviation of the title (Hurston’s *Their Eyes*). Introduce characters in the same way you would introduce people in real life, with a descriptive phrase (Fitzgerald’s Midwestern narrator, Nick Carraway; Myrtle’s husband, the garage owner George Wilson).

After you have done enough brainstorming or drafting to find your “so what?” (this can occur surprisingly late in the process), go back and **write a vigorous thesis statement in a single well-crafted sentence.** To make this statement vigorous, imagine a reader who would disagree with you. Use your thesis to capture your best insight. Place it early in the paper in a prominent position.

Identity is an important theme in both *The Great Gatsby*, by F. Scott Fitzgerald, and *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, by Zora Neale Hurston. The main characters of the two novels, Gatsby and Janie, abandon their childhood identities, but with very different results: Gatsby’s experiences lead to his destruction while Janie’s life experiences help her to create a strong, integrated adult self capable of continued growth and change.

Broadcast your thesis in each paragraph. *Every sentence in your paper should address your topic.* But the first sentence of body paragraphs (called the topic sentence), should directly support or illustrate the *thesis* and explain how the paragraph will continue to do so. Use transition words (however, so, but, although, moreover, additionally) and phrases (Another character who...; Unlike Daisy, Janie...). Even better, repeat key terms or phrases to clarify how the paragraph works within itself and with the main idea or thesis (key terms from the example above include *identity, self, abandon, integrate, growth*).

Choose your quotations carefully, but quote at least once per body paragraph (probably more). Paraphrase in order to avoid overlong quotations. You can also abbreviate quotations by using an ellipsis [...] in brackets to indicate omitted words, and you can change a strategic word to make the quotation fit into your sentence more smoothly by placing [brackets] around it. Quote to illustrate an assertion, but assume your readers will not recognize the significance of your choice. Analyze and explain.

Although Jody seems proud of Janie’s appearance, he uses an unflattering comparison when he asks her to think of herself as a “bell-cow” leading the rest of the herd (39). Janie goes along with his wishes, but her clothes protest for her, “rustl[ing] and

* These guidelines apply only to prose literature such as fiction and memoir. Poetry and drama have additional citation requirements.

mutter[ing]" (39). The connotations of these words suggest Janie's dissatisfaction with her role in her husband's town.

A work of literature comes alive each time we open the book (if we are lucky), so we **use present tense when writing about literature**. Present tense is also a convention that distinguishes MLA (Modern Language Association) style from others, such as APA (American Psychological Association). Janie *says*, "They got tuh go tuh God, and they got tuh find out about livin' fuh theyselves" (183). Fitzgerald's candles *are* an ambiguous symbol. Gatsby *shoulders* his mattress and *walks* to the pool. (When writing about a character's past, you may find it necessary to slip into past tense. Do so if present tense sounds clumsy: Earlier Janie had been dependent on her grandmother's ways; now she is finally able to break free of her influence.)

Punctuate quotations correctly. In American English, we place periods and commas inside closed quotations; when citing using MLA guidelines, however, we withhold the final punctuation until after the citation: One critic insists that Janie is dying at the end of the novel (Hattenhauer 43). Make exceptions for question marks and exclamation points: Jody whispers to Janie, "Too late?" (81). Notice that while the question mark is placed within the quotation, the student's sentence ends with a period only after the page citation. Use single quotes only when indicating internal punctuation. In this quotation, for instance, Janie repeats her own words: "So Ah ast, 'where is me? Ah don't see me'" (9).

When you quote a long passage (more than three lines), indent 1" from the left margin (this should be the default 2nd tab or a hanging indent), omit the use of quotation marks, punctuate at the end of the quotation, and then place the parenthetical citation after the period. This is an exception to the rule governing punctuation of quotations integrated into your paragraphs. As indented quotations tend to be more than one sentence, and the page citation applies to all, the exception makes sense. (9)

To conclude gracefully, simply reflect on your thesis (your best insight) or a significant part of it and stop writing. Avoid phrases such as "In summary," or "In conclusion." As the poet says, if the ending is right, we should be able to hear your paper (or poem) "click shut."

In the novel's closing images, Janie sits rocking, a packet of garden seed in her overall pocket. Unlike Gatsby, she continues to represent growth and change.

Correct grammar and good style add clarity to your ideas. Proofreading for grammatical errors and typos can come last (with the penultimate PRINTED copy), but even if every sentence in your paper is correct, your style may still need work. Be willing to "tweak" each sentence to make it work well internally and with the sentences around it. Read aloud to yourself or ask a friend to read your paper aloud to you. If the style sounds flat, one good way to improve it is to deliberately vary your sentences in structure and length. Watch out for too many introductory clauses. They look elegant, but used too often, sound clunky.

As with every other line in your paper, your title must address your topic. If you've rewritten your thesis and introductory paragraph, then you may need to throw out your working title as well. **Craft a title that accurately broadcasts your topic** whether simple (Godlessness in *Gatsby*), or complicated ("Ah' m a Cracked Plate": What Janie Learns in Nanny's Kitchen).

My Expectations When Reading Any Student Paper:

A forceful sentence in the first paragraph predicts the paper's content.
Any passage quoted at length is hugely significant and will be given adequate analysis.
The writer has proofread and corrected the final copy to the best of his or her ability.