

Ten Guidelines for Writing about Short Fiction (MLA)

We sometimes call the topic the “what,” and the thesis the “so what?” To find “so whatness” for your paper, begin by choosing a topic that promises a discovery. An image or passage that you find fascinating, puzzling, or troubling is your best choice, as you need to stay with this topic long enough to tease it beyond the obvious. You want, as a student of mine once put it, a topic with “sass factor.” For instance, it is an interesting observation that Digby in T. Coraghessan Boyle’s “Greasy Lake” has, despite what the narrator claimed earlier, been attending his P.E. class; my topic takes on real potential, however, only after I ask, “So what?” What do we learn about the narrator and his bad boy friends when we interrogate this detail?

Build context for your reader. Imagine writing for someone who has read the same stories, and will remember them with a little prompting from you. Introduce the title(s) and author(s) in the first lines of your paper. Place titles of stories (also poems, essays, and articles) in “quotation marks” (underline or *italicize* book titles). The first time you mention a story, use the complete title and full name of the author (Sandra Cisneros’s “My Name”). Thereafter, use the author’s last name only and, if need be, an abbreviation of the title (Porter’s “Granny Weatherall”). Introduce characters with a descriptive phrase, as you might introduce a person in real life (Horatio’s older brother Hector).

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. (Some instructors want the thesis to be the first sentence; I assume I will find it before the end of the first paragraph, though if you have a compelling reason you may delay the thesis to the beginning of the second paragraph.)

Broadcast your thesis in each paragraph. *Every sentence in your paper should address your topic.* But the first sentence of a paragraph, 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 Digby, Jeff...). Even better, repeat key terms or phrases to clarify how the paragraph works within itself and with the main idea or thesis.

Fully use your quotations. When writing a literary analysis, you must use quotations, but the quotations should serve your ideas, and not the other way around. Paraphrase in order to avoid overlong quotations. You can also abbreviate quotations by using an ellipsis [...] 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. Let your ideas surround or “frame” your quotations: introduce the quotation, then analyze it. Don’t assume your readers will instantly recognize the beauty and significance of your choice. Explain.

Use present tense. This rule exists because a work of literature comes alive, if we’re lucky, each time we open the book. Additionally, present tense is a convention that distinguishes MLA (Modern Language Association) style from others, such as APA (American Psychological Association). Granny *remembers* dusting the lion clock. She *wishes* she could tell George about her successful life. When writing about a character’s backstory, you may find it necessary to slip into past tense. Do so if present tense sounds clumsy.

When you write about a historical figure, including an author, use past tense: Eudora Welty *worked* for the WPA during the Great Depression.

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 (Reid 2). Make exceptions for question marks and exclamation points: Livvie wonders, "Is that what marriage is?" (Welty 38). (Notice that while the question mark is placed within the quotation, the student's sentence ends with a period only after the page citation.) For internal quotes (a quote within a quote), use "double" quotation marks on the outside, and 'single ' quotation marks inside. "'I don't see me,' Janie said" (153). A long quotation is handled differently:

If a quotation runs to more than four typed lines, set it off from your text by beginning a new line, indenting one inch [. . .] from the left margin, and typing it double-spaced [as with your entire manuscript], without adding quotation marks. A colon generally introduces a quotation displayed in this way, though sometimes the context may require a different mark of punctuation or none at all. If you quote only a single paragraph or part of one, do not indent the first line more than the rest. A parenthetical reference to a prose quotation set off from the text follows the last line [and final punctuation] of the [indented] quotation. (Gibaldi 110-111)*

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 Nike says, "Just Do It."

Correct grammar and good style add clarity to your ideas. Proofreading for grammatical errors, sound-alike words (there/their; it's/its; you're/your) and typos can come last, with the penultimate printed copy. But even if every sentence in the paper is correct, the style will usually benefit from additional attention. Look at sentences individually and as they flow into and through one another. 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 are clunky when used too often. A short sentence adds emphasis. Like many teachers, I assume that the final paper you have given me represents your best effort, so I mark at least the more interesting errors and give "mini-lectures" in the margins.

Revisit your title after you've finished (or almost finished) your paper. You may choose a title that is simple (Digby's P.E. Class) or complicated ("No Dogs Allowed": A Close Reading of the Café Sign in Nicolasa Mohr's "An Awakening...Summer 1956"), but use it to accurately broadcast your topic.

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* Gibaldi, Joseph. *MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers*. 6th ed. New York: MLA, 2003.