

Table of Contents

Topic	Page Numbers
Taking Notes	2
Reading Shakespeare	2
Explication (includes instructions and an example)	2 - 5
Test	5
Short Paper	6
Essay Format	6 - 8
Conventions in Literary Discussion	8
Some Tips for Writing a Paper	9
Common Grammar Errors	10
Grading Criteria	11

## Taking Notes

It is very important to take notes when you read. It will help you understand what you're reading, prepare for exams, and write your papers.

1. Mark anything that you don't understand.
2. If a word is unfamiliar, or used in an unfamiliar way in the text, mark it and look it up in a dictionary.
3. Mark anything that you think is important and write notes in the margins.
4. Note why you think an idea is important.
5. Note connections that you can make between what you see in the passage and what you've read before.
6. Note questions that the passage raises.
7. Note why you agree or disagree with the author.

## Reading Shakespeare

Here are some questions to consider as you read each play:

1. Is there a clear theme in the play? How is the theme expressed and developed?
2. Can you see a pattern in the words and images (image: a mental picture, a written description, a figure of speech, symbol; imagery: images collectively) used? For example, do you see a lot of references to love, sex, sin, redemption, nature, power, etc.?
3. Who is the speaker of a speech?
4. What is his or her role in the play?
5. What is his or her relationship to other characters in the play?

## Explication

Some questions to consider:

1. Can you discern a clear speaking voice in the poem? How would you describe the speaker? What seems to be tone that is used in the poem? (joyful, satiric, sad, mournful, happy, ironic?)
2. Are there any images in the passage that seem particularly powerful to you?
3. Are there any word choices that seem particularly compelling to you?
4. What kind of feelings do they evoke in you?
5. What structural patterns do you see?

Make sure you:

- Focus on the passage
- Go beyond paraphrase or plot summary
- Analyze in detail the development of a significant theme or idea

### **Steps to Writing an Explication**

Circle or underline key words or phrases that seem meaningful to you. Make notes in the margins about the connections that you see between significant ideas in the text.

Brainstorm-- on some elements to consider in the text:

Word choices: What kinds of words are used? Active or passive? Abstract or concrete? What verb tenses are used? Do nouns, verbs, or adjectives predominate? Are there many nouns, verbs, or adjectives of one particular type?

Speaker: Who is speaking? Who is the speaker addressing? Is there any interaction between the speaker and others in the text?

Images: What kinds of images are used in the text? Do you see any images or metaphors that are particularly effective? What ideas are evoked by those images?

Tone: What is the tone of the speaker? Of the text? Happy, angry, assertive, sad, regretful?

Punctuation: Do you see any unusual usage of any punctuation marks? Do they draw your attention to some particular point in the text? Could the author be attempting to emphasize a certain idea?

Construct a working thesis

Try to argue how the speaker is saying something or acting in a way that is not obvious or assumed.

For example:

The "to be or not to be" soliloquy serves as an integral guide to understanding Hamlet's character and some of the choices he makes. In these lines we find Hamlet's central mental concern, how this concern illustrates his character, and a deeper understanding of specific actions (or non-actions) Hamlet makes in the play.

Analyze the details you have chosen to support the thesis.

For example: Discuss some aspects of Hamlet's character and relate them in detail to some of his choices and actions.

What images do you see in the soliloquy? What is the tone that is conveyed in the speech? Does a particular word choice or image support certain claims that you're making?

Construct an outline and clarify the connections that you are making between your ideas.

Do not analyze the passage line by line.

Focus on your main topic and organize your ideas around it.

Avoid large, general, or obvious statements, such as "*Hamlet* is the greatest play that was ever written," or "Hamlet was a great tragic hero."

***Some writing tips:***

- Organize your ideas: outline, clustering, mind map, etc.
- Construct a tentative thesis that may be modified later.
- Begin a new paragraph each time you start discussing a new idea.
- Develop an idea before moving on to a new one: discuss specific details, examples, or other evidence from the text.
- Use transitions to connect ideas to each other.
- Check for the overall coherence of your response: do all of your ideas support the thesis and are they all related to each other?

\*Some of this material is adapted from resources at

<http://www.complit.uiuc.edu/CLIT142/EXPLICATION.html>.

*What follows here is an example of an explication written by a student in this course. It was written during a timed test similar to the one you will be taking during mid-semester, so for the purposes of this writing assignment, this writing sample is only meant to give you an idea of what an explication of a Shakespearean speech looks like.*

The "to be or not to be" soliloquy is easily some of Hamlet's most recognized words. Not only is it a famous speech, but the lines serve as an integral guide to understanding Hamlet's character and some of the choices he makes. In these lines we find Hamlet's central mental concern, how this concern illustrates his character, and a deeper understanding of specific actions (or non-actions) Hamlet makes in the play.

Hamlet's central concern here is balancing the pros and cons of taking his own life. He is fully aware that the troubles plaguing him may be endured, eventually leading to a [sustainable] existence. We sense that he believes there may be a certain dignity to that option: dignity being an expected concern of one born into royal blood. On the other hand, his use of the word "sleep" to describe taking his own life, suggests he is exhausted from the toils of existence. Hamlet's concern in balancing these choices lies in not knowing what the afterlife may bring. He is not sure if death will bring a better set of circumstances, and he wonders if he should simply suffer in life.

Much of Hamlet's character may be assessed from this [aforementioned] concern, and from other clues in the passage. The very fact that he struggles over the merits of life vs. death illustrates the introspective nature of our hero. Much of his language shows Hamlet's concern with the unknown nature of options. "To be or not to be," "whether or," "perchance"; all of this language suggests a man who lives more by thought than impulse. Hamlet's character also proves to be that of a realist. He recognizes that flesh is "heir to" heartache. This is to say that he knows that living and troubles are

bound (and the use of the word "heir" once again demonstrates Hamlet's royal mindset.) A reader does not feel Hamlet thinks his turmoil is unique, as adopting a "woe is me" attitude.

Hamlet's concern with the afterlife and his introspective nature are fused when we look at some of his actions in the play. An extroverted man of action might have marched straight to the king and demanded answers. Instead, Hamlet hatches an elaborate plan of staging a play that resembles his father's death, with the intention of viewing Claudius' reaction. This let's-sit-back-and-observe-guilt-in-facial expressions idea is typical of a man who demonstrates the kind of introspection prevalent in the "to be" soliloquy. Also, when Hamlet blows his chance to kill the kneeling king, it is his concerns of the afterlife that prevent him. Though in that case the worry is reversed. Hamlet wants Claudius to have a tortured afterlife, so he will not slay him while he appears to be praying.

This famous passage of Hamlet is crucial to understanding the titular hero. It serves as the moral compass and character guidepost through which we can analyze his motion through the play.

## Test

In the in-class test, for which you should bring small blue books, you will be given three passages and you will choose two of them to answer. You will be asked to write two detailed essays that analyze the passages. You will be expected to develop your own interpretations and support your views with appropriate examples from the texts, without falling back on summarizing the plot or paraphrasing the language of the author.

The passages that will appear on the test will be passages that we discuss or refer to in class, so your attendance and active participation in class are crucial for your success in the course.

Prepare for the test by

1. reading the plays carefully-- at least three times
2. making notes as you read
3. taking the time to think about what the text means to you
4. considering why you agree or disagree with the ideas discussed in class

An excellent response would

- Focus on cited passage
- Go beyond paraphrase or plot summary
- Develop ideas by making connections between the passage and the rest of the text, i.e., provide:
  1. context of the passage
  2. analysis of the development of a common theme or idea
  3. insight into a character and his or her role
  4. relation to other themes in the text

## Short Paper

Your short paper should be a comparative analysis of themes, characters, or ideas in **two** plays.

It must be turned in on time; a late paper will be penalized one full letter grade.

I will give you some suggested topics; but you may also write your own topic—just make sure that you discuss at least two plays in your paper.

## Essay Format

*(These guidelines are adapted from Dr. Toise's syllabus)*

1. Papers should be typed; and the font should be 12 point and clearly readable.
2. Use 8 1/2 inch x 11 inch white typing paper.
3. Set 1 inch margins all around.
4. Use double spacing throughout.
5. Do not include a title page. On the first page, starting one inch from the top and flush with the left margin, type your name, my name (Professor Yen), the course number, and the date. Double space and center the title. Double space twice and begin the first line of your paper.
6. Staple the pages together.
7. Indent five spaces at the beginning of each paragraph.
8. Concentrate on developing your own reading and interpretation of the texts.
9. Do not include too many direct quotations; instead, try to paraphrase or summarize when you need to refer to ideas expressed in the text.
10. To quote one, two, or three lines of poetry, use a slash mark (/) to show line breaks. To quote more than three lines, set the quotation off as a block quote-- without quotation marks around it. Indent one inch from the left margin, keeping the capitalization and punctuation of lines as they appeared in the original poem. Introduce long quotations with some of your own language and follow the introduction with a colon.

For example:

- A. Hamlet's soliloquies bulk so large in our response to the play because they not only guarantee the existence of the hero's secret inner life; they also, by their relentless self-questioning, imply the presence of still more profoundly secret truths "hid within the center": "I do not know/ Why

yet I live to say "This thing's to do, / Sith I have cause, and will, and strength, and means / To do 't" (4.4.46-49).

- B. As the Ghost pours his story into Hamlet's ear (the gesture highlighted by the Ghost's incantatory repetition of "hear" and "ear"), we become aware of an uncanny parallel between the Ghost's act of narration and the murder the Ghost tells about:

'Tis given out that, sleeping in my orchard,  
 A serpent stung me. So the whole ear of Denmark  
 Is by a forged process of my death  
 Rankly abused. . . . (1.5.42-45)

\*Both of these examples are taken from the critical essay at the back of the Folger edition of *Hamlet*.

11. You are not required to include research for this paper, but if you use other people's ideas to set up your argument, use the MLA format for documenting secondary sources, that is, use a works cited page and parenthetical citations. When you quote an author, follow the quotation with the writer's last name, a space, and then the page number on which the quotation was found.

For example:

At least one major recent critic has pointed out that "In Iago's first soliloquy, Shakespeare goes out of his way to emphasize the improvised nature of the villain's plot" (Greenblatt 232).

12. At the end your paper, include a work cited list that is alphabetized by the author's name.
- On your last page, the words "Works Cited" in the center.
  - Skip two lines and then list each of the works you have used in the essay.
  - In an entry for a book, first type the author's name, followed by a comma, followed by the first name, and then a period. Then give the title of the book underlined or in *italics*. Follow this by a period. Then give the city of publication, followed by a colon ":". Then type the name of the publisher and a comma. Lastly, give the year of publication, followed by a period. At the beginning of each line of the entry that goes beyond the first, indent five spaces.

For example:

#### Works Cited

Greenblatt, Stephen. *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare*. Chicago:

University of Chicago Press, 1980.

Neill, Michael. "Hamlet: A Modern Perspective." *The Tragedy of Hamlet: Prince of Denmark*.

By William Shakespeare. Eds. Barbara A. Mowat and Paul Werstine. The New Folger

Library Shakespeare. New York: Washington Square Press, 1992.

Shakespeare, William. *The Tragedy of Hamlet: Prince of Denmark*. Eds. Barbara A. Mowat and

Paul Werstine. The New Folger Library Shakespeare. New York: Washington Square

Press, 1992.8

#### Some Conventions in Literary Discussion

1. Use present tense verbs for your discussion. Shift to other tenses only when logical to do so.

For example: "Shakespeare **portrays** [present tense, third person singular] Gertrude as a weak but well-meaning woman."

2. After the first reference, refer to the author by last name only. Usually, you should not make references to the author in the discussion; instead, refer to the speaker or to the play itself.

For example: "**Hamlet's soliloquies** reveal to us his grief and inner turmoil."

3. Avoid the second person pronoun (you) and direct references to readers.

**Don't** say: "**You** can really identify with the Edmund when **you** hear Gloucester talk about him to Kent as if he isn't even on the stage."

## Some Tips for Writing a Paper

### I. Thesis:

In your introductory paragraph, don't just say that there are similarities and differences between the two texts that you have chosen to analyze and then proceed to list them. Try to make connections between your ideas. And consider what the main point of your paper is going to be.

It is generally easiest to put your thesis at the end of the first paragraph. But you could really put it anywhere you want—even in the conclusion. Just make sure that your paper includes a clear thesis, which could be two or three sentences long.

### II. Development and Organization:

#### 1. Topic sentences

It is helpful to write a topic sentence at the beginning of each paragraph to help you organize your ideas and determine how they are all going to fit together—within the paragraph. Generally speaking, a topic sentence is not a quote from the text, a statement of fact, or plot summary. It's more like a small "thesis" statement alerting your reader to what you are going to discuss in the paragraph.

#### 2. Examples

Make sure that you have included examples which will support the claims that you make in your topic sentence. And then make sure that after you have cited the examples, you go beyond paraphrase or plot summary to analyze the passages—that is, explain their significance and what you think they mean and how you think they relate to your main point in each paragraph. Remember to use specific examples.

When you are considering particular passages to use for illustration, ask yourself specific questions such as the following:

- How does the passage illustrate how Shakespeare portrays Ophelia?
- How does the language used in the passage create a sense of Othello's heroic stature?
- Will an analysis of the passage enable me to make a point about Shakespeare's theme of revenge?

When you use quotations, remember to include one or more sentences to explain why you are using the quotation. In other words, why is the quote significant and what kinds of connections can you make between the quote and other ideas already discussed in the paper?

### III. Planning and Proofreading:

Start writing your paper as early as possible; and proofread carefully before turning it in.

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**Most common types of grammatical errors that I see:**

1. run-on sentences
  2. sentence fragments
  3. lack of agreement in number
  4. faulty parallelism
  5. unclear pronoun reference
  6. misspelling
  7. missing or misplaced commas
  8. missing or misplaced apostrophes
- 

**For more help with writing your paper, please**

- ask me
  - consult any standard grammar book or Diana Hacker's *A Writer's Reference*
  - consult the Writing Center at Harvard at <http://www.fas.harvard.edu/~wricntr/html/tools.htm>;  
or the University of Wisconsin's online guide at  
<http://www.wisc.edu/writing/Handbook/DocMLA.html>.
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**Written work for this course will be graded for:**

1. Substantive content and clearly articulated thesis
2. Adequate examples to support the thesis
3. Detailed analysis of examples
4. Effective organization of ideas
5. Careful attention to mechanics of writing

### Grading Criteria for Written Work

	A	B	C	D or F
Clearly articulated thesis	The very best essays will address the topic clearly. It will contain a thoughtful and carefully articulated thesis.	Good essays will also address the topic clearly and include a clear thesis.	Less successful essays may not address the topic very clearly or contain a viable thesis.	An unsatisfactory essay does not address the topic or contain a thesis.
Adequate examples to support the thesis	It will include well-chosen examples taken from the texts that will be carefully focused to support the thesis.	It will also include examples, although its choice of examples to support the thesis may not be particularly appropriate.	It will include some examples from texts.	It may include some references to texts that are not yet connected to each other in a meaningful way.
Detailed analysis of examples	It will include detailed analysis of the examples.	It will include careful analysis of particular texts, although the discussion of the examples may not be well focused.	It will also include some analysis of those examples.	It may include some attempt at analyzing the examples, though clear connections between ideas are not yet evident.
Effective organization	It will be effectively organized.	It will be effectively organized.	It will demonstrate some effort in organization.	It does not appear to be organized.
Careful attention to mechanics of writing	It will be carefully documented and well polished.	It will be carefully written.	It will also show some care in the writing.	It contains an excessive number of typographical and grammatical errors.