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# Writing an Essay

## A Student's Guide

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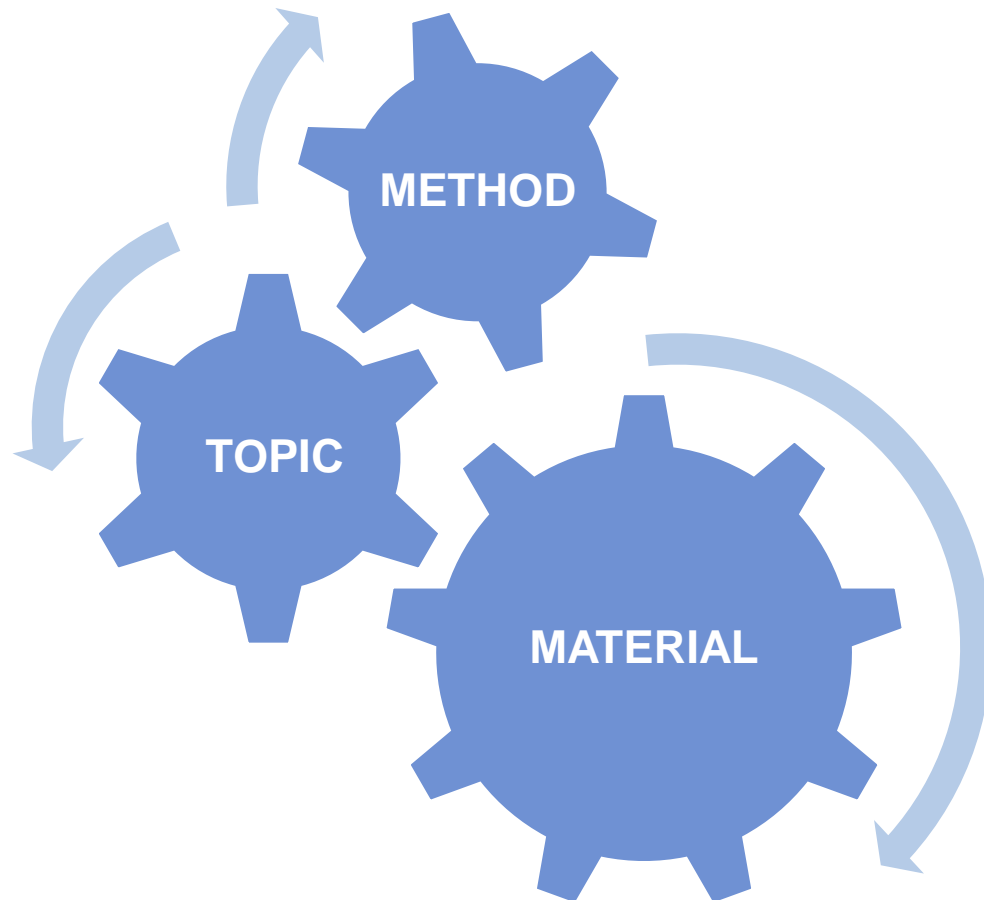
- An academic essay is a specific genre. Unlike what the majority of students experienced at high school, it is not based on their individual feelings and thoughts on a certain topic. In the context of a literary seminar, it is an analysis of a literary text based on an argument and supported by evidence from both primary and secondary sources.
- These guidelines were created to assist students when writing their first essays. Students should not rely solely on this presentation and are encouraged to do their own research into essay writing methodology.
- Students should always make sure they are familiar with the requirements of the particular course.



- Selection of an appropriate topic is essential for writing a successful academic essay.
- The student selects one aspect/motif/topic of a literary work they wish to analyse. Comparison of several works is possible, but it must be justified.
- It is important to select a topic that fits the required length, meaning that some topics are more suitable for an essay of 1,000 words while other work better for a BA/MA thesis. The topic should be discussed in some depth using appropriate academic secondary sources. It is recommended to consult the topic with the supervisor prior to writing even if they do not require it.
- The student should prepare an annotated paragraph plan before they begin writing the actual essay. This plan can consist of an outline emphasizing the main points they want to discuss in the essay. It also helps to determine whether the topic is suitable for the assigned word range.



# Topic Selection II



- When selecting a topic, it is crucial to clarify three main areas:
  1. **MATERIAL** – what work/works the student wants to analyse
  2. **TOPIC** – what the student wants to analyse in this work
  3. **METHOD** – how the student wants to approach this topic
- All the three main components must work together to create a good essay.



# Narrowing the Topic

general topic (pigs)

specific topic (can pigs fly?)

very specific topic (the analysis of pigs'  
inability to fly)

title of the essay ("The Analysis of Pigs'  
Inability to Fly from Biological,  
Philosophical, and Economic  
Perspective")



- Also called *academic argument*. Basically the body of the essay.
- In terms of an essay, an argument means a point of view, or a stance, not an act of disagreeing with someone.
- A good argument is presented in a clear and logical way, avoiding ambiguity as much as possible.
- The argument is supported by examples and direct quotations from the primary sources.
- References to secondary sources are used to support the student points (but the secondary sources should not replace the student's own arguments).
- Present tense should be used as much as possible throughout the essay as it sounds more assertive (including the introduction and conclusion), especially when quoting someone because it may sound outdated otherwise (e.g. the author of this paper says/claims/observes...).



- The title is an integral part of an essay. The student should make sure the title corresponds with the content and it clearly defines the topic of the essay (e.g. “Analysis of Daniel Defoe’s *Moll Flanders*” does not give potential readers any idea what the author focuses on in their analysis, while “[Analysis of] Dysfunctional Family Relationships in Daniel Defoe’s *Moll Flanders*” does).
- The essay should consist of three main parts: an introduction, an argument, and a conclusion. Whenever the student cites primary or secondary sources, “Works Cited” page must be included at the end of the essay.
- The introduction should include a clear thesis statement which in one or two sentences summarizes what the student is going to discuss in the essay.
- The argument is the main body of the essay. It should have a clear structure with individual paragraphs focused on individual points.
- The conclusion should not present new information but conclude the findings of the argument.



- Coherence is key. The student needs to be coherent in their style and their ideas and sentences must hold together. Proper use of discourse markers (adverbs, conjunctions, etc.) is crucial for expressing inner relationships in a paragraph and in between the paragraphs.
- The essay must stay focused and stick to the main idea.
- The essay must be clearly structured. Apart from the general structure introduction–argument–conclusion, transition signals (e.g. first, second, next, finally, on the other hand, etc.) are a very useful tool to achieve internal coherence of the text.





- Students are required to use MLA formatting: Times New Roman or other clearly legible font, 12pt, double-spaced.
- The title is centred, title-cased, and unformatted (apart from a title of a book/short story/poem mentioned in the title of the essay; e.g. “Dysfunctional Family Relationships in Daniel Defoe’s *Moll Flanders*”).
- The student includes a header with their last name and page number in the upper right-hand corner.
- Book titles are italicized, short stories/poems/essays are in quotation marks (e.g. *Everything That Rises Must Converge* as a whole short-story collection is italicized while “Everything That Rises Must Converge” as a short story is in quotation marks).
- When in doubt, see [https://owl.purdue.edu/owl/research\\_and\\_citation/mla\\_style/mla\\_formatting\\_and\\_style\\_guide/mla\\_general\\_format.html](https://owl.purdue.edu/owl/research_and_citation/mla_style/mla_formatting_and_style_guide/mla_general_format.html), which contains a sample of the first page.



# Secondary Literature

- Finding relevant academic secondary literature (aka secondary sources) is an integral part of writing an essay and should be taken into consideration during the process of selecting the topic.
- Students must not use non-academic online sources such as SparkNotes, Cliffnotes, Shmoop, etc., since these are not academic sources.
- Wikipedia cannot be recommended as a secondary source since it is not an academic source and the information provided may not be accurate. However, it can be useful for finding academic sources as it includes references.
- Generally, the most reliable academic sources are books published by well-known publishing houses or university presses or articles published by peer-reviewed academic journals.
- Students are encouraged to search relevant sources via databases such as EBSCO or JSTOR (accessible via the library).



- Secondary sources must be relevant to the topic of the essay. However, if the student cannot find any secondary source discussing the particular topic or primary source, they can try to research the author and find relevant results in this way.
- Secondary literature should predominantly serve as evidence and support for student's claims. Nevertheless, the secondary sources are not to be read uncritically and the student can also include counter-arguments (it is perfectly fine to disagree with secondary literature; actually it is an opportunity to demonstrate student's ability of critical thinking). Including a counter-argument is optional and the student should make sure that this counter-argument is valid for the argument they make in the essay (it should not be an end in itself).



- Whenever the student uses any source, no matter whether they quote it directly, paraphrase or summarize the idea, they must refer to this source properly to avoid plagiarism. Plagiarism means using ideas of others without proper citation. Plagiarism in any form will not be tolerated.
- When researching the topic, it is essential that the student makes detailed notes/photocopies and knows where they came across the idea they mention in their essay and can cite it properly.
- The student must not copy-paste any part of their text from anywhere apart from the clearly marked quotations.
- When the student refers to the plot of the primary source and does not use a direct quotation, they do not have to cite this or refer to a particular page unless it is necessary for understanding.



## Citations – Paraphrase vs. Direct Quotation

- **Paraphrase** means that the student mentions an idea from a secondary source, but puts it in their own words.
- **Direct quotation** means that the students uses exactly the same words as the secondary source.
- Both a quotation and a paraphrase have to be introduced properly to distinguish between student's own ideas and ideas of others. The student also needs to incorporate the quotation into the text, meaning that they introduce it and then comment on it.
- Examples:
  - Paraphrase: We should not use ideas of others without proper citation (Kovářová 12). vs. Direct quotation: One rule of writing an essay is that “[w]henver the student uses any source, no matter whether they quote it directly, paraphrase or summarize the idea, they must refer to this source properly to avoid plagiarism” (Kovářová 12).
  - Paraphrase: Kovářová claims that we should not use ideas of others without proper citation (12). vs. Direct quotation: Kovářová claims that “[w]henver the student uses any source, no matter whether they quote it directly, paraphrase or summarize the idea, they must refer to this source properly to avoid plagiarism” (12).



- A direct quotation is in English double quotation marks: “ ”. It is NOT italicized.
- When the quotation is longer than three lines, a block quotation is used. In this case there are no quotation marks and the text is indented.
  - Example:

Kovářová claims that

[w]henever the student uses any source, no matter whether they quote it directly, paraphrase or summarize the idea, they must refer to this source properly to avoid plagiarism. Plagiarism means using ideas of others without proper citation. Plagiarism in any form will not be tolerated (12).



# Citations – In-text Citations

- MLA uses so-called in-text citations (Author page). The student refers to the author and the exact page where the quotation can be found. This applies also for poems and plays.
- In case of short quotations from poems, the individual lines are indicated by using a slash (/) [e.g. “line 1 / line 2 / line 3” (Author page)].
- If the author is mentioned in the sentence, it is not repeated in the citation – see the examples on page 13.
- For more information on in-text citations see [https://owl.purdue.edu/owl/research\\_and\\_citation/mla\\_style/mla\\_formatting\\_and\\_style\\_guide/mla\\_in\\_text\\_citations\\_the\\_basics.html](https://owl.purdue.edu/owl/research_and_citation/mla_style/mla_formatting_and_style_guide/mla_in_text_citations_the_basics.html)



# Citations – Works Cited

- “Works Cited” page listing all the sources must be included in the essay.
- The sources must be listed alphabetically according to MLA rules.
- If there is both an author and an editor, they must be both included in the entry.
- Examples:
  - **Whole book:** Last Name, First Name. *Title of Book*. City of Publication, Publisher, Publication Date.
  - **Primary source with an editor:** Last Name, First Name. *Title of Book*, edited by First Name, Last Name, City of Publication, Publisher, Publication Date.
  - **Article in an academic journal:** Last name, First Name. “Title of Article.” Title of Journal, Volume, Issue, Year, pages.
  - **A poem/essay in a collection:** Last name, First name. “Title of Essay/Poem.” Title of Collection, Publisher, Year, Page range of entry.
  - **Piece in an anthology/collection (e.g. Norton):** Last name, First name. “Title of Essay/Poem/Whatever.” Title of Collection, edited by Editor's Name(s), Publisher, Year, Page range of entry.
- Please note that these are general examples. Students must consult [https://owl.purdue.edu/owl/research\\_and\\_citation/mla\\_style/mla\\_formatting\\_and\\_style\\_guide/mla\\_formatting\\_and\\_style\\_guide.html](https://owl.purdue.edu/owl/research_and_citation/mla_style/mla_formatting_and_style_guide/mla_formatting_and_style_guide.html) and find the individual category of the source they cite and cite it accordingly (electronic sources, works with multiple authors, translated books, etc.).





- Students are expected to use academic style, meaning the essay should be explicit in explaining the author's ideas, emotionally neutral, formal, and using appropriate register in terms of both grammar and vocabulary.
- Contractions must not be used in formal style (~~don't~~ → do not, ~~can't~~ → cannot, etc.)
- English quotation marks differ from the Czech ones and look like this: “/””. Double quotation marks are used for direct quotations.
- Present simple is the basic tense of an academic style since it states facts and ideas. The same applies for describing a part of the plot, etc. (e.g. The analysis focuses...; At the beginning of the play, Hamlet encounters a ghost...). Of course other tenses are used to express correct time scale, etc.



- Proofreading is very important to avoid typing errors and unnecessary mistakes.
- The student should try to read their text with fresh eyes.
- When proofreading, one should try to empathize with their reader and ask questions such as: Are my arguments clear? Do my sentences make sense? Is this paragraph coherent?
- It is important to learn to be critical to one's own work.
- Proofreading should also serve to make sure the essay is emotionally neutral.
- When in doubt, the student should consult a dictionary.
- The student should use spellcheck. Always.



- The student is not expected to provide any biographical information about the author unless it is substantial for their interpretation. The same applies for plot summary. Instead, the introduction should focus on the topic of the essay and the thesis statement.
- When a primary source is mentioned in the essay for the first time, it is good to include the year of publication [e.g. This essay focuses on the relationship between the human and the nonhuman in the novel *The Crossing* (1994) by an American author Cormac McCarthy].
- The student should check the title to use capitals where appropriate since titles are usually capitalized in English.
- “I” and “we” should be avoided throughout the essay as much as possible. Passive voice is usually a good substitute. Remember, an academic text should be rather impersonal.
- When copying a quote from a different source, the student needs to unify the formatting.



- **Academic essay:** an analysis of a literary text based on an argument and supported by evidence from both primary and secondary sources.
- **Academic style:** a formal and emotionally neutral style which is based on facts.
- **Citation:** a proper reference to works of other authors.
- **Paraphrase:** an idea from a secondary source rephrased by the student.
- **Primary source:** the text that is analysed (novel, short story, poem, etc.)
- **Quotation:** an idea from another text put exactly in the same words as in the original.
- **Secondary source/literature:** an academic text which analyses the primary text. Usually a book or an article in an academic journal.
- **Thesis statement:** the student says in one or two sentences what they are going to analyse in the whole essay (e.g. This essay analyses/focuses on...).
- **Topic sentence:** usually the first topic of a paragraph which states the topic of the whole paragraph.



- [https://owl.purdue.edu/owl/research\\_and\\_citation/mla\\_style/mla\\_style\\_introduction.html](https://owl.purdue.edu/owl/research_and_citation/mla_style/mla_style_introduction.html)  
– a complete guide on formatting and citations
- <https://www.student.unsw.edu.au/essay-writing-basics>  
– on the process of writing
- <https://www.eapfoundation.com/writing/cohesion/transitions/>  
– on transition signals (rather informal source but provides some valuable information)