

Alicia Andrzejewski
William & Mary
apandrzejewski@wm.edu

What Dr. A is Writing on Papers Over & Over Again

First things first. You must work to establish an authoritative, stylish **writer's voice** that is all your own. Take pride in this voice. Read your papers out loud—do they have a distinctive voice or are they bland? Do they sound like you (you, certainly, are not a bland person) or like what you think a scholar should sound like? Play with language in purposeful ways, to seduce and sway the reader. Take intellectual and creative risks rather than making the first or “easiest” argument that comes to mind. Write a paper you’d be proud of no matter the grade you receive on it.

When you’re thinking about a **topic** to write on, begin with moments in the literature that were particularly memorable or impactful *for you*. Do some low stakes writing exploring why these moments had the impact they did, paying careful attention to the language and literary devices the author uses. **Note: you cannot write a good paper if you did not actually do the reading—summaries online don’t make for an emotional or impactful reading experience, so this step will be impossible and your paper will likely be general and detached and pointless.**

The title of your paper works as a first impression and as the first articulation of your argument. “Close Reading Paper” is a title that suggests you don’t see your writing as important beyond the scope of this assignment and that you see me as your only reader. I don’t want this kind of writing. Make sure you include the author and title of the text you’re close reading to all paper titles as well as a specific articulation of your topic. You might incorporate some language that inspired your argument in quotations or simply go with a clever, concise articulation of your focus. Just remember, the title frames everything that follows. Don’t throw it away.

The first line of your essay should grab the reader’s attention and orient them as swiftly as possible to the text you are analyzing and the context of your argument. You might choose to begin by introducing a quote that’s at the heart of your argument, or by describing the scene your argument revolves around. Often, the first sentence is where you’ll introduce the author and text you’re working with again, but you can take some creative and intellectual risks with your first impression (as long as you aren’t making general claims about the world or your topic, like “since the beginning of time people have been mothers”).

To write a strong essay about a literary text, you need to present **an analytical thesis**, usually the last sentence of the introductory paragraph. In this sentence, you must make an arguable claim about a compelling (and ideally original) way to interpret the text. It is a claim a good reader of the text *could* disagree with and a claim provable by the evidence you have (primarily language from the text, your primary source or object of study).

Well-constructed paragraphs are at the heart of good **argumentation, organization, and transitions** in an academic paper. Think of them as mini essays, all of them related to and working to prove your thesis. Ask yourself what each paragraph is doing—why is it there? What's its point? The first sentence of each paragraph (**your topic sentence**) should make an arguable claim *in your own voice* that relates back to your overarching argument. Don't begin your paragraphs with quotations, quotations are evidence that you are using to prove *your* claims. *Your* voice should be front and center. The topic sentence is the “mini-claim” the body of the paragraph goes on to prove through **evidence and analysis**. Once you have fleshed out and proven the claim, rearticulate it for the reader to end the paragraph (just as you would to conclude a paper).

Instead of using pat transition words to join paragraphs (however, therefore, etc.), **transition** by building on claims and ideas from the previous paragraph, connecting your mini arguments together to build to your most compelling claims by the essay's end. You might look to repeat key words in the ending and beginning sentences of paragraphs to transition.

Try to respecify **ambiguous pronouns** (this, it, she, he, etc.) each time you start a new sentence. If this feels too repetitive, you might connect the two independent clauses with a semicolon. Being specific in this way helps your reader follow your claims more clearly.

When professors say to write in **the “active” voice** what they really mean is there needs to be a clear “actor” in your sentence—whatever is *doing* the verbs you use. Think about organizing your sentences like you would an essay: the subject or most important part of the sentence comes as early as possible and the verb follows quickly after.

Your conclusion should restate your argument to remind the reader of what you have just worked so hard to prove and move on to articulate the broader stakes of your claim. In other words, your conclusion should answer the question: why should anyone care about your argument? To discover your answer to this question, read your thesis out loud and ask yourself, “so what?” Now would be the time to make some generalizations related to your argument about how the world works, if you've been dying to, but remember specificity and detail are at the heart of good argumentation and good writing.

Finally: writing is never perfect (usually, the deadline arrives far too soon), but are you proud of what you've written? Do you feel like you've opened up a new way of looking at the literature for readers? Have you discovered anything about yourself or the text in the process? Pick your favorite sentence out of the paper, read it aloud, and pat yourself on the back. Writing is hard.