

Literary Response Essay

The purpose of a Literary Response is to demonstrate an understanding of the elements in a literary work. This understanding is conveyed through accurate interpretations and clear ideas about the literary work.

Essay Format Guidelines:

I. Introduction:

- A. **Hook:** Start with an interesting opening that “hooks” your audience in (anecdotes, quotes, profound statements, and thought provoking questions work well). If you cannot think of a good hook, skip it and go straight to summary.
- B. **Summary:** This should be a one to two sentence summary of the literary work including the title, author, and conflict.
- C. **Thesis:** This is your response (answer/opinion) to the writing prompt. Refer to the Thesis Handout for writing a good thesis. If you cannot think of good thesis, just parrot the writing prompt.

Sample Introduction

(Hook) The sound of a car accident is often accompanied by skidding tires and breaking glass—or just quiet weeping in the night. **(Summary)** In *Backwater Betty Black*, by Greg Doherty, both sounds are heard. The novel is the story of a jaded psych nurse, Betty Black, who takes a mental patient, Doug Vane, on a road trip that would try anyone's sanity. Ultimately, the story portrays the relationship between happiness and control. **(Thesis)** To be happy, Doherty argues, one must be neither too controlling nor too controlled, and sometimes the only way to gain perspective on one's sense of control is to lose control.

Note: Notice how the title of the novel is italicized.

II. Body paragraphs:

- A. **Topic Sentence:** This states what your paragraph is about, namely one reason that supports your thesis.
- B. **Two-Three Chunks: This is made up of two parts.**
 - 1. **Concrete Details (CD):** This is evidence that should be either paraphrased or directly quoted from the story you are analyzing. When using direct quotations, use proper MLA formatting, i.e. signal phrases and citations.

2. **Commentary (COMM):** This explains how your concrete details support your topic sentence. You should have at least double the amount of commentary as concrete detail. One sentence of Concrete Detail should have two sentences of commentary or more.

COMM Tip: Some helpful sentence starters you can use for your commentary include but are not limited to:

- This event shows/proves/explains...
- Because of this...
- This image conveys/represents/reveals...
- His/her words/dialogue conveys/reveals...
- The author includes this in the story to show...

3. **Concluding Sentence:** This should wrap-up your body paragraph by re-wording the topic of the paragraph in a fresh way.

Sample Body Paragraph

(Topic Sentence) Taking control is a habit for Betty, but it is not one that gives her joy. **(CD)** When Doug first gets in her car, she tells him exactly how to behave and even what to wear. She makes him remove his cowboy hat, saying, "There's a reason you never see sisters dating cowboys. Fashion sense." (4) **(COMM)** Here, she uses intimidation regarding a choice he has made—his look—to keep his behavior in check. And while effective, this makes her less friendly, a less likable character. Like many who have clawed their way towards a certain status in a job or society, she is not above grinding her (high) heels into a few foreheads to help keep herself elevated.

III. Conclusion:

A. Thesis re-worded in a fresh way.

- B. **Closing thoughts:** (at least 2 sentences!) Make interesting points to leave the audience with a strong final feeling about your topic (anecdotes, quotes, profound statements, and thought provoking questions work well here).

Sample Conclusion

In a way, reading this novel is like seeing an enactment of the "Serenity Prayer" that, perhaps not coincidentally, is on the tongues of many 12-step program followers, themselves dealing with control issues. While Betty searches for the serenity to accept the things she cannot change, Doug must dig for the courage to change what he can. And only by first getting it all wrong do each of them discover the wisdom to know the difference.

Sample Literary Essay

From 11th grade American Literature

(HOOK) Is love purely a feeling – or something more? If each person's interpretation of love is unique, then how do we know what someone is saying when they say "I love you"? **(SUMMARY)** In F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, we watch the romantic tragedy of the mysterious Jay Gatsby and beautiful Daisy Buchanan through the eyes of Nick, a common friend and young businessman. Their story would make anyone reconsider what love really means. **(THESIS)** Fitzgerald wrote *The Great Gatsby* to show that in relationships, love or compassion does not necessarily imply a sense of commitment to a person, and vice versa.

(CD) Tom Buchanan is a grown up version of your typical high school jock. **(CD)** He's big and strong, but not too smart. **(CD)** He's married to Daisy, but is actively having an affair with a woman named Myrtle Wilson. **(COMM)** This relationship is filled with irony: Daisy is beautiful and charming, while Myrtle is neither. **(COMM)** It is also ironic that Tom still feels some sort of commitment to his wife, even while with Myrtle. **(CD)** At a party in Manhattan, when a drunken Myrtle cries out, "Daisy! Daisy! Daisy!... I'll say it whenever I want to!" (41) Tom actually gets so angry that he strikes her and breaks her nose. **(COMM)** Even while choosing to be with Myrtle over his wife, he feels the need to protect his wife. **(TS)** It actually seems that he cares for both women, but does not feel committed to either.

This theme against commitment is not just connected with the main characters. Fitzgerald portrays it as the common behavior for many married couples during the 1920s, when the book is set. Nick, attending one of Gatsby's elaborate parties, notices that "most of the remaining women were now having fights with men said to be their husbands." (p. 56) One such husband "was talking with a curious intensity to a young actress, and his wife after attempting to laugh at the situation in a dignified and indifferent way broke down entirely and resorted to flank attacks..." (p. 56) Flirtation and even pursuit of other relationships, even in the presence of one's spouse, is common in the world Fitzgerald creates. But why would someone cheat on the person they had vowed to love for eternity? It again brings up the point that their love and commitment do not always go hand in hand, so to speak.

The main affair that takes place in the book is between Daisy and Gatsby. Having been separated for years, their new time together is truly magical for both of them. Both Daisy and Tom attend a party at Gatsby's home. Nick watches Gatsby and Daisy dance with each other: "I remembered being surprised by his graceful, conservative fox trot – I had never seen him dance before. Then they sauntered over to my house and sat on the steps for a half hour while at her request I remained watchfully in the garden..." (p. 112) Daisy leaves Tom for a long period of the evening to be with Gatsby, a man Tom doesn't even know really anything about. Neither Gatsby nor Daisy appear to care much about the suspiciousness and bluntness of their behavior. This attitude intensifies later in the book when Gatsby is at Daisy's, and as Tom leaves the room, "she got up and went over to Gatsby, and pulled his face down, kissing him on the mouth." (p. 122) She is not afraid to show public affection toward Gatsby, even so close to her husband. This is because although she has vowed her commitment to her husband, she really seems to love Gatsby, and not Tom.

Finally, the love triangle has it out. Daisy confesses to Tom that she loves Gatsby, not him. And for a moment, it seems that Gatsby has won. He will keep Daisy. But then Gatsby insists on hearing that she never loved Tom – that, in effect, commitment and love can be entirely

separate. She was committed to Tom, but always loved Gatsby. This is where Fitzgerald gets tricky with his theme: he doesn't let commitment and love get entirely separated. Daisy admits she had once had feelings for Tom; she'd loved them both. "You loved me too?" (p. 133) Gatsby asks, looking as if he'd been punched in the stomach. It turns out, while love and commitment are not necessarily connected, keeping them entirely separated is like going outside and not getting dirty. You can't count on it.

Later, Gatsby in the passenger seat, Daisy runs over Tom's mistress, Myrtle, killing her. Gatsby says he's willing to take the blame for her – "Of course I'll say I was [driving]," he tells Nick. Yet despite a night-long vigil outside her window, he never gets so much as a thank you from her. In fact, he gets killed for his troubles, when Mr. Wilson takes his revenge – and she does not even attend his funeral. This was the man who, days earlier, she "loved." She and Tom leave town, retreating into their "vast carelessness" and heading to "wherever rich people go to be together," according to Nick's bitter observations.

There is such a thing as commitment. Recently, thousands of people in New Orleans waited out floods, lootings and other hardships out of a commitment to their sense of home. Similar sacrifices have been made since time began, by parents, soldiers, lovers and "saints." But commitment needs an object – one is committed to something; to simply "be committed" is actually a euphemism for going crazy and getting sent to a mental institution! Daisy turned out to be committed not to love, in the end, but to her own riches and comfort. If you are to fall in love with someone, Fitzgerald is suggesting with Gatsby, you should make sure your lover is committed to you. Or else you are what Gatsby turned out to be – and what Daisy once said she hoped her daughter would be, in this cruel, noncommittal world: a fool.

Literature Response Tips for Success:

- Use my outline carefully to make sure your essay has everything it needs to be a success!
- Don't use first person personal pronouns like I, we, you, or me or second person pronouns like you, yours, and your. The focus should be on the literature, not on yourself or the reader.
- Avoid filler phrases like "I think that...." or "I believe..."; just get straight to the point of what you are saying. We know you think what you write because you are the author!
- Use present tense verbs because fiction happens as we read it, not in the past.
- Use active verbs, not "to be" verbs like is and are.
Poor example: He is running away.
Corrected example: He runs away.
- Use formal language (no clichés or slang like "let the cat out of the bag")
- Vary the vocabulary (a thesaurus can help!) trying not to repeat words or use low impact, generic words like good, bad, happy, sad. Use are Caught Ya'! Words!
- Look at your Spelling Unforgivables and Spelling DaVinci Code to ensure you won't lose any points for spelling mistakes.
- Make sure to read your essay out loud to catch simple mistakes.