

Why Write About Literature?

The odds are high that even though you are using this textbook for a first year English composition class, you are not an English major. Probably, you are required to take this course as part of your first year of college coursework to sharpen your writing, research, argument, and thinking skills so that in future classes, and later in your life, these proficiencies will serve you well in accomplishing important tasks. A study of **rhetoric**, the art of persuasion, can help you refine your ability to influence others, through both writing and speaking. With these goals in mind, it may seem odd that this first year composition book is filled with poetry, short stories, and plays, and even includes discussion of literary devices, like rhyme and rhythm, metaphor, and point of view! Yet, many English instructors do, indeed, choose to teach at least one semester of first year composition in the context of literary studies.

Why do they do this? Do they enjoy watching you squirm as you struggle to find the meaning in a line of Shakespeare's poetry? Probably not. There are a couple of other important reasons that are much more pivotal to the content choice of your instructor—let's call him Dr. Lopez—than his desire to bedevil you.

Most likely, Dr. Lopez feels that literature is the best context for your writing this semester because

1. He is better able to evaluate the effectiveness of your compositions if they are written on a topic with which he has some expertise. If you wrote a paper arguing for the superiority of one cancer treatment over another, he would certainly be able to test the validity of your logic and the clarity of your

presentation. However, he might not feel comfortable judging whether current cancer research supports your stance. After following your research process all semester, he might become familiar with the sources you employed in your paper, but he would still lack knowledge of the general body of research on this subject. On the other hand, if you write your essay on how, in the poem “Do Not Go Gentle into That Good Night,” Dylan Thomas illustrates his speaker’s fear of his own death, Dr. Lopez is on much firmer ground. Since he is an expert on twentieth century British literature, and happens to have earned a master’s degree in twentieth century world literature, not only can he see the gaps in your argument, but he can also guide you toward sources that could help fill in those gaps. The resulting student papers written as a product of Dr. Lopez’s literature-focused class will likely be more valid than if he had chosen a topic less familiar to him.

2. Further, he believes that no matter what content a professor uses for this course, students should be improving their understanding of how language makes meaning. What better context for pursuing this goal than a discipline in which words are the subject? In writing your paper on Thomas’s poem, you will not only be practicing your skills in research, argument, organization, grammar, and documentation, but you will also be learning, from Thomas himself (among other authors), how words can be used rhetorically to persuade one’s reader toward a particular perspective.
3. Literature is a fruitful context in which to practice supporting an argument with textual evidence. Periodically, in one of my upper level English literature classes, I encounter a pre-law student who is required to take my class as part of her pre-law curriculum. If this policy at first seems odd, closer examination reveals its logic. In a court of law, attorneys spend much of their time referring to the language of particular laws and drawing the jury’s attention to specific pieces of evidence—often from reports, letters, interview transcripts, and previous cases. The first time I served on a jury, I was fascinated to see how much the trial’s structure—with the lawyers’ opening remarks, their back-and-forth examination of evidence and witnesses, and their closing remarks—resembled that of an argumentative

essay. I was gratified to witness their constant references to written texts as evidence supporting their positions, either as prosecutor or defender.

4. In spite of all the poems, stories, and dramas on Dr. Lopez's syllabus, make no mistake—his purpose is to help you improve your writing. In particular, such a course focuses on the rhetorical skills that will aid you in making successful arguments based on convincing and well-presented evidence. Of course, here, the term argument does not necessarily mean heated debate, but rather refers to the case a writer makes in defending a specific perspective. If most readers have assumed that “Do Not Go Gentle into That Good Night” is a simple expression of the speaker's sorrow about his father's impending death, your essay might convince those readers that a better understanding of the poem comes with recognition of the speaker's anxiety about death in general, which includes the speaker's fear of his own demise. As you practice constructing a strong case for your interpretation of a literary work, you will be building skills that help produce effective writing in any context.

I hope that in the process of reading closely and critically, gathering evidence, working through various paths of thought, researching secondary sources, organizing ideas into logical arguments, and revising your writing for the greatest impact, you will also enjoy the literature you read in this class. When students write about something that truly interests them, the product is almost always better than if a writer has simply “jumped through the hoops.” Look for works in this volume that explore issues and themes you care about. This should help make the semester an engaging and enjoyable one, for both you *and* Dr. Lopez!