

have little practice applying them to literary texts, you may also need to offer guided practice and response. Here are some sample critique assignments:

- According to the standards it lays out, is “How to Tell a True War Story” a true war story?
- In “Sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong,” O’Brien portrays Mary Ann Bell’s descent into a state of brutishness. Is he successful in this characterization?
- In *The Things They Carried*, Tim O’Brien creates a character named Tim O’Brien. Is this an effective narrative technique in “Lives of the Dead”? Why or why not?

Critiques call for an argumentative thesis: students have to articulate and defend a claim or interpretation. They typically support their thesis with explicated examples from the source text and/or references to other critics.

### Synthesis Essays

These assignments ask students to work with more than one literary text in their papers. The essays can require students to respond to, analyze, or critique the readings. Here are some sample synthesis assignments:

- Which story did you like better, “Sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong” or “On a Rainy River”? Why?
- In several vignettes or “intercalary” chapters, O’Brien discusses the nature of storytelling. Which discussion was clearer, the one contained in “Spin” or the one contained in “Good Form”?
- O’Brien claims that sometimes “story truth” is truer than “happening truth.” Which story better illustrates this theme, “How to Tell a True War Story” or “Ghost Story”? How so?
- Many critics have highly praised the story “The Things They Carried.” Summarize the arguments of at least three critics who praise the piece. Which critic is most convincing or enlightening?

To complete these assignments, students have to examine more than one story, synthesizing material from the literary texts and perhaps from critics to support their thesis.

## COMMON PROBLEMS STUDENTS ENCOUNTER WHEN WRITING ABOUT LITERATURE

Learning how to write literature-based essays takes time and practice; like any other academic genre, it has its own conventions that students need to master. Knowing the kinds of errors students typically make when they

compose literature-based essays can help you teach this type of writing more effectively—you can let your students know the pitfalls to avoid as they write and revise their papers.

### Summarizing the Plot

Instead of explaining an assertion or developing an argument in their papers, students often summarize the text’s plot. Plot summary typically comes in two forms. Sometimes the entire paper is nothing but plot summary—the student simply retells the story. Other times plot summary is used as evidence to support a claim. The students know they need textual support for their assertions, so after they make a claim, they summarize a relevant passage from the text. However, instead of articulating the relationship between the passage and their claim—explaining how the passage does, in fact, support or illustrate their assertion—they let the summarized text “speak for itself,” relying on their readers to draw the connection between the assertion and its support.

Learning how to use plot summary effectively takes instruction and practice. Explain what plot summary is, acknowledge why it appears so often in student papers, and provide examples of plot summaries used effectively and ineffectively in essays. Teach students how to properly support assertions in literature-based essays without resorting to this technique.

### Employing the Proper Tense

For students new to literary criticism, tense poses special problems. The students’ natural inclination is to use past tense in their papers—after all, the author wrote the work some time ago. Explaining why literary critics use the present tense can be difficult. Of course, you can require students to use it because it is a convention, but it is best to explain how this choice of tense relates to the way one reads and understands literary texts: because the action of the work unfolds as one is reading it, one discusses those events in the present tense. Past tense is saved for discussing past events in the work itself. Employing this convention as you discuss literary texts in class can help your students learn to use it in their writing. Through repeated exposure and correction, using present tense in their literature-based essays will become habitual for your students.

### Quoting Material

Teaching your students how to quote and document material from literary texts correctly takes time. First, cover the conventions of quoting that apply to the literary genre your students are reading. If you are studying poems, for example, teach your students how to indicate line breaks when quoting material and how to employ block quotations; if you are reading plays, explain how to block-quote passages involving more than one speaker; if you are

teaching a novel or short story, show how to quote dialogue. The same holds true for documentation conventions: depending on which texts you are studying, teach your students how to document lines of poems, scenes and acts of plays, and page numbers of novels and short stories.

Second, explain how to use quoted material effectively in literature-based papers. Teach your students when to quote and paraphrase material, how to quote and paraphrase it, how to integrate quoted and paraphrased material into their essay, and how to avoid misquoting texts.

### Supporting Assertions

Only a few students in most introductory-level classes fully understand how to support assertions in literature-based essays. The most common techniques they employ include quoting and paraphrasing material from the text, citing specific examples, and summarizing the plot. Any of these techniques can, of course, help support a claim, and every critic uses them to some degree. However, you need to teach your students how to support their claims using a wider variety of evidence (including secondary sources and even personal experience, depending on the assignment), how to choose the best kinds of support for their claims, how to locate and evaluate literary criticism, and how to draw clear, strong connections between a claim and its evidence.

### Misreading Texts

Never assume that your students understand what they read, even if you think the text is accessible and your students assure you they have no questions. The best approach when discussing literature: move from the literal to the interpretive. When discussing a literary text for the first time, do not immediately leap into interpretation. Instead, first make sure your students can identify the work's characters, summarize its plot, and identify its point of view. Students cannot successfully analyze, critique, or interpret a text they misread.

## PROBLEMS TO AVOID WHEN TEACHING LITERATURE

When teaching literature for the first time, most TAs make up for their lack of experience with their enthusiasm—when you are excited about the material you are teaching, most of your students will be excited too. However, even the most enthusiastic instructor can fall into some common traps when teaching literary texts. Avoiding these problems will improve the quality of your teaching.

### Monopolizing Discussions

Even TAs who describe their teaching style as discussion-based rather than lecture-based can monopolize class time when they teach literary texts by answering their own questions or elaborating at length on their students'

remarks. Because many teachers hate silence in the classroom, when one of their questions goes unanswered, they jump in with the response they hoped to receive from their students. Silence, of course, is not necessarily bad in a literature class. If you ask a particularly thought-provoking question, students will need a few moments to formulate their response. If you too quickly supply the answer, you deny your students an opportunity to add their voice to the discussion. Other teachers monopolize classroom discussion by elaborating at length on their students' comments. Instead of asking the students to elaborate on their statement, the teacher uses the students' response as a starting point for a lengthy commentary of his or her own.

To avoid these problems, first, learn to be patient when you ask a question in class—wait for your students' answers. If your students look puzzled, rephrase the question or call on a student for a response. Second, listen to your students. Too often when paraphrasing what a student has said, teachers misrepresent the student's point. Whenever you paraphrase a response, ask the student if your restatement is fair and accurate. If it is not, ask the student to repeat his or her comment and try to paraphrase it again. Repeat the process until the student accepts your articulation. At that point, the discussion can continue. Third, ask follow-up questions. Rather than elaborating yourself on a student's comment, ask the student to do it. You can guide the student through the process by asking good questions. Fourth, broaden discussions by pulling in other students. If a student makes a comment, ask another student to paraphrase it and see if the first student agrees that the paraphrase is fair and accurate. Encourage the free exchange of ideas. If one student contradicts what another has said, point out the contradiction and see if the two students can more fully express their differences. In good class discussions students are talking with each other; your job is to referee and record—to keep the conversation flowing and civil and to take notes on the board to record what the students have said.

### Mishandling Discussions

Sometimes discussions of literature fail because the students have not read or understood the assigned texts; other times they fail because the teacher has not asked the right kinds of questions. For example, do not try to spur class discussion by asking a question that has only one correct answer. Instead, ask questions that have more than one valid response. "*Who marries Hamlet's mother after Hamlet's father dies?*" will generate less discussion than "*Why is Hamlet so hesitant to kill Claudius?*" In the best discussions, you and your students will work out answers together.

Class discussions can also falter if they lack focus. Most of the students in introductory writing or literature classes are not experienced critics; they probably do not know how to analyze and evaluate literary texts the way you would like them to. Consequently, open-ended questions such as "*What did you find most interesting about these poems?*" typically result in only one or two insightful responses before the class falls silent. To get beyond these initial comments, teach your students how to analyze literary texts or lead them through a systematic close reading of the text yourself.