

HOW TO WRITE AN ESSAY ON A WORK OF LITERATURE

This is an introductory guide about how to write an essay. You should work through this document several times as you attempt to develop a sense of how to write logical, coherent, well-supported, and well-argued essays. The examples in this guide respond to the question below:

*Through close reading of chapter 9 and chapter 13 of *The Catcher in the Rye*, write an essay in which you show how Salinger uses (1) narrative point of view, (2) imagery and (3) the motif of phoniness to explore how Holden's attitudes towards sex reveal his uncertain sense of self.*

A NOTE ON ESSAY WRITING

While most academic writers eventually develop their own writing style over time, usually in response to different topics and texts, many undergraduate students submit essays that are poorly structured.

In most cases, our essays on works of literature try to construct and sustain tight **arguments**, in which we try to prove why our particular 'reading' of the novel, poem, or play is a valid one. Your essay should advance a very tightly focused position that responds to the specific requirements of the question. In the case of the essay question above, this **argument** should clearly indicate how Holden's attitudes towards sex reflect his uncertain sense of self. All your ideas must be linked to this main point.

Remember that an **introduction** is not simply 'the first paragraph' of your essay. It is so much more important than that. An introduction is your opportunity to contextualise the essay for readers, state clearly what you are going to be arguing, and give readers a sense of where your essay is going and *how* you will support your argument. Most good introductions include the following main parts:

1. **Contextualisation:** This is where you tell the reader of your essay what it is that you are talking about. You should (1) name the writer, (2) name the text, and (3) provide no more than two or three sentences explaining what the text is about. The titles of novels and plays should appear in italics when an essay is typed and underlined when an essay has been handwritten. The titles of poems should always appear in “quotation marks”. When you refer to the author of the novel, poem, or play for the first time, use their full name and surname. Thereafter, only use their surname. We never refer to an author by simply using their first name.
2. **Thesis statement:** Your introduction must contain a clear statement that indicates what your argument is going to be. While this may be expressed in different ways (depending on the question), the argumentative focus should always be clear to the reader. You may want to include sentences such as ‘In this essay I argue that the novel...’, ‘The essay will show why the play’s representation of...’, or any other similar expression. If you are given an extract, you should also contextualise and link it here.
3. **Indicating the structure:** Your introduction should have a few sentences that indicate *how* you will be arguing your point. In other words, you should very briefly state or discuss what main ideas you will be ‘unpacking’ in the subsequent paragraphs in the body of the essay. You may want to use the ‘Firstly, ...’, ‘Secondly,...’ formulation.

A possible introduction for the question above:

J.D. Salinger’s novel *The Catcher in the Rye* focuses on the experiences and perspectives of its protagonist and narrator, Holden Caulfield. The novel explores themes of belonging and identity through Holden’s growing sense of alienation from his society and adulthood. Holden appears to have serious difficulty relating appropriately to those around him, not only his male peers but also girls and young women. In this essay I argue that Holden’s contradictory and unreliable descriptions of sex and intimacy reveal his uncertain sense of self. The novel points to the way in which sex is seen simultaneously as an act of adolescent

rebellion and as a point of entry into adulthood. Readers can trace how Holden's ambivalent feelings about growing up and rebellion are explored, in part, through his ambivalent feelings about sex. The first person narrative point of view is significant in the novel in that it reveals not only the protagonist's perspectives but also the inherent unreliability of these ideas. This, as my essay will show, is also clear in the imagery that Holden uses to describe sex. This childish imagery in the chapters impose a distance between Holden and the physical reality of sexual intimacy. Phoniness, finally, a recurring motif throughout the novel, also works to expose Holden's sense of uncertainty and alienation.

Paragraphs in the body of the essay are ways of arranging information in coherent ways so that they *support* and provide *evidence* for the argument that your essay is making. Each paragraph in the body of an essay should focus on a different aspect of the main argument or topic. Each paragraph should also have a single focus and its relevance to the argument that you are making should be very clear.

Writing a paragraph:

A paragraph in the body of an essay should be structured in a way that the ideas develop logically and that the argument is clear throughout:

- The first sentence of any paragraph should indicate what that paragraph will be about. We call this the '**topic sentence**'. Avoid expressions such as 'This paragraph is about sex and adulthood'. You should rather write: 'Salinger uses the first person narrative point of view to explore Holden's relationship to sex'. In this way, readers of your essay will know that you are not only talking about sex but will also know what your particular focus in this paragraph will be.
- While the topic sentence makes a particular claim, the rest of the paragraph then needs to support and 'prove' it. Support usually takes one of two forms, either (1) close reading of extracts or (2) analysis of significant moments in the novel.

Close readings of a text: You should be able to identify and integrate quotations into grammatically correct sentences. Remember that you always need to discuss quotations and explain how they support the

argument you are making. You may want to use phrases such as ‘This comment reveals how...’ or ‘This image is evidence of the way in which the novel...’

Analysis of significant moments in a text: You should be able to identify important moments in the text and then discuss them. It is very important that you do not merely retell the story. Instead, you need to *analyse* the significance of particular moments or characters and show how these relate to the main topic of the question.

- Make sure that all the quotes and examples in the paragraph have been effectively linked to the argument that you are making. To avoid paragraphs that end up being unfocused and irrelevant, you may want to end your paragraph with a sentence that connects the ideas to the broader argument or question.

Writing a conclusion

Good conclusions might:

- begin with a phrase reflecting that this is the concluding paragraph of the essay such as ‘In conclusion,...’ or ‘Finally,...’
- include the name of the writer and the text again

Good conclusions must:

- reiterate the essay’s main argument
- summarise the different points that have been discussed in the body of the essay and briefly show the reader, again, how they support your central claim

Conclusions must not:

- have a heading (of course, there should be *no* headings in essays on literature)
- introduce new ideas
- include quotations or clichés that are dramatic and/or irrelevant

- make moralistic assertions about society
- exaggerate the claims that you have made
- tell the reader of the essay how much you enjoyed the text

A possible conclusion for the question above:

In conclusion, Salinger's *Catcher in the Rye* is an exploration of adolescent anxiety and uncertainty. Holden's fragmented sense of identity relies on dishonesty and exaggeration as his narrative reveals his attempts to make sense of who he is. Sex in the novel, and in these chapters in particular, is a way of exploring the character's uncertainty about both adolescence and adulthood and the inevitable and ambiguous shift between them. The first person narrative point of view is central to the exploration of Holden's character. Not only does his narrative give readers direct access to his thoughts and feelings but it also reveals his unreliability as a narrator. The imagery in these chapters also points to Holden's unwillingness to face the reality of sex and the maturation that it symbolises. Similarly, the motif of phoniness in the novel and in his description of girls in these chapters points to Holden's failure to recognise his own inauthenticity and fragmented sense of self. Ultimately, sex is both known and unknowable to Holden and is one of the many things about approaching adulthood that he both craves and rejects.

♣ This guide has been informed by the following book:

Peck, J. & Coyle, M. 2012. *The Student's Guide to Writing: Spelling, Punctuation and Grammar*. London & New York: Palgrave MacMillan.