Study Tips: Literature

THE UNIVERSITY OF RHODE ISLAND

Grading for English classes has a reputation for being subjective, if not arbitrary. After all, questions on English exams rarely have one right answer. But don't be fooled. English professors don't take off points because they don't like you or because their opinions differ from yours. Here are some tips for acing your English exams..

Start With the Basics

Let's say you've been assigned Mark Twain's *Tom Sawyer* or T.S. Eliot's "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock." Before you begin reading, keep in mind that you will need to be in command of this literature for classroom discussion, papers and, of course, exams.

Be realistic—very few students have the time to read any long literary work more than once. This means you need to **read carefully and effectively the first time around.**

Always read with a pen or pencil in hand so that you can take notes, ask questions and mark important passages as you read. During classroom discussion, always write down the ideas covered and passages analyzed—these are likely to be at the heart of any future exam.

In a notepad or at the front of your book**, keep track of essential basic information**. You'll impress no one if you call the main character "what's-his-name" or if you claim that *Moby Dick* is an eighteenth-century British novel. Important information includes:

- **Title and Author:** This may sound like a no-brainer, but on an exam you don't want to confuse Herrick with Herbert, write about Mary Shelly (it's "Shelley"), or draw a blank when trying to remember that story by Shirley Jackson.
- **Date and Location:** Know when and where each assigned reading was written. You'll lose points if you confuse the Medieval Period with the Renaissance. If something is Post-Modern, don't call it Modern. For literature in translation, be sure you understand the cultural context in which the work was created.
- **Character Names:** Every time a new character appears in a piece of literature, write down the name, page number and a brief character description. You'll need to know who's who when taking an exam.
- **Plot:** For any narrative work, make sure you have a clear understanding of the main plot points. As you read, write a brief plot summary at the beginning of each section or chapter—this will allow you to refresh your memory before an exam without rereading the work.
- **Genre:** Be precise when identifying the type of literature you are reading. Your professor will likely deduct points if you call a play a novel, or a poem a story. The more specific you are, the better. Is the work an "Italian Epic Poem," a "Modernist Story," a "Renaissance Tragedy" or a "Gothic Novel"?

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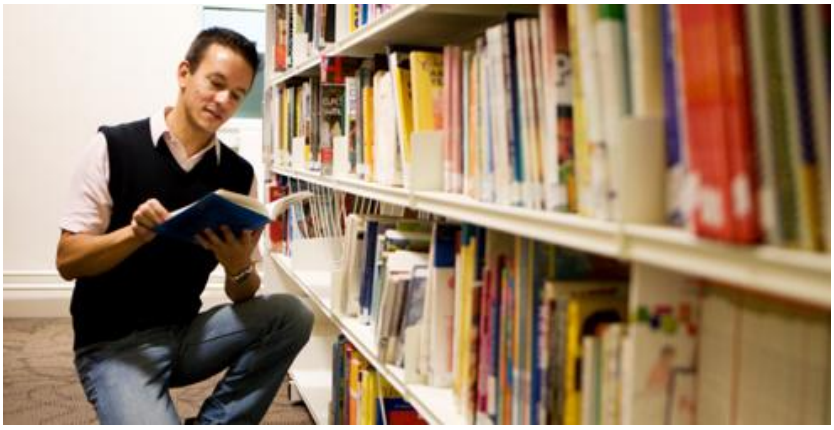

Terminology

A class in biology or history probably involves much more memorization than an English class. Nevertheless, you will do best on your English papers and exams if you **learn essential literary terms.**

When discussing a poem, you will often be talking about stanzas not paragraphs, lines not sentences. You should be familiar with the building blocks of poetry—metaphor, simile, personification, rhyme, meter and form. Has your professor introduced terms like zeugma or caesura? If so, be prepared to use this specialized vocabulary on your exam.

For every work you read in an English class, you **should be prepared to discuss its tone and point of view.** You should be able to identify theme and motif. You'll need to know how to distinguish a word's connotation from its denotation. Exams that earn an "A" usually demonstrate mastery of this type of terminology.

Analysis, Not Summary

Okay—you've pinned down the details of the text and you've mastered the key terms. Are you ready for the exam? Not yet. While your professor will expect you to know textual details and use an appropriate vocabulary when discussing a literary work, **your success in an English course will depend largely on your ability to speak and write *analytically*.**

Back in early grade school, you may have written book reports—summaries of the books you read. Such writing simply states what happens to whom. It represents rather mindless regurgitation of main plot points. Such simplistic stuff has little place in a college English class.

In college, you will need to ***analyze* the textual details.** *Why* do certain events happen? What are the motives of the characters? *Why* has the author written in a particular style? What is the *significance* of the point of view? *How* does the cultural and historical context influence the writing?

Your professors will grade you not just on what you know, but how you think. Are you able to discuss the complexity of a work and see below the surface? Can you draw connections between works? Can you formulate new ideas and do more than parrot back points made in class? Can you explain how tone qualifies the meaning of a work, how irony allows an author to say one thing but mean something else? Can you extract social and political agendas hidden in a piece of writing?

If you can demonstrate this type of ***critical thinking*** in your exams and papers, you are well on your way to success in an English class.

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Anticipate the Questions

You can obviously study character names and vocabulary. But is it possible to prepare for an exam that requires you to demonstrate critical thinking skills? Fortunately, yes.

Many English exams contain questions that require paragraph or essay-length answers. Your professors will ask only those questions that they see as central to the course. Did you spend a week exploring Walt Whitman's representation of sexuality? If so, it's a likely topic for an essay question. Remember that class in which you analyzed the character of the fool in Shakespeare's plays? Again, it's a potential exam topic.

If you've taken careful notes in class, you can try to guess what essay questions your professor is likely to ask. What are the big topics you've been exploring? Once you come up with a list of possible questions, spend a few hours writing practice essays. If you predict a question correctly, you'll have a huge advantage during the exam. If you don't, you've still done some excellent exam preparation—writing those practice answers got you thinking about the literature analytically. You've exercised your critical thinking.

What About *SPARKNOTES*?

The web and bookstores are filled with study guides for English classes—*CliffsNotes, SparkNotes, Monarch Notes* and many others. Realize that your English professors might have a negative view of these guides. This is for good reason—a large percentage of college plagiarism comes from such sources, and many students read the notes rather than the actual literature.

That said, these study guides can serve a useful function—they can help you understand a complex plot, analyze characters and identify central themes. They can also provide useful summaries when you're reviewing for an exam.

But remember, a study guide never substitutes for reading the literature—they can't capture the tone, language, detail and richness of the original work. And if you borrow ideas or language from something like *SparkNotes*, always cite your source. Failure to do so can result in an "F" or even expulsion.