9. Writing about Texts / Literature

**Audience:**
Assume your audience has read the work but may not have considered the specific thesis you are trying to prove. Experiencing literature is so individual that we all have something to offer.

**Tense:**
Always write about literature in the present tense. It is alive and ongoing.

**Summary and analysis are different:**
Summary recounts the entire plot in chronological order and offers no commentary. Analysis focuses on one small aspect—imagery, setting, characterization—and forces you to determine its significance to the work as a whole. You are not restricted to chronological order since you will only be working with those passages that deal with your thesis.

**Title:**
Your title should reflect some thought on your part and should, under no circumstances, be the title of the work you are analyzing. Furthermore, you should not underline, place in quotations, bold, or all-cap your title.

**Introduction:**
In addition to providing adequate background and interest for the reader, your introduction must also provide the complete title of the work (short stories and poems in quotation marks; plays and novels underlined or italicized) and the author’s complete name. Thereafter, you may refer to the author by last name. Your introduction will also contain a very brief (no more than three or four sentences) plot summary and, of course, your thesis. Make sure your thesis makes an arguable point, not simply a statement of fact.

**Body Paragraphs:**
Make sure each body paragraph has a specific topic sentence dealing with each of your main points. Double check to see that all information in that paragraph leads directly from that topic sentence to your thesis. You will almost certainly use quotes from the primary text in each body paragraph.

**Using the text for support:**
As with any assertion, you must provide evidence to prove your point. You will find this evidence within the primary text and/or secondary texts. When using quoted material, always lead-into and follow-up the quote; it cannot stand alone. You will
make your point, use the quote as evidence, and then explain how the quote proves your statement. You will never begin or end a body paragraph with quoted material. Your voice, your opinion, should be strongest.

Refer to the Harbrace Handbook, the MLA Handbook, or Writing Center tutorials if you are unsure about MLA format. When introducing quoted material with a complete sentence, use a colon. When introducing material with a dependent clause, use a comma. When using a quote within the flow of your own sentence, punctuate as you would if you did not have a quote. For example:

- Later, Berger tells Conrad that his schedule will be based on patient ratings: “The higher I rate, the fewer times you gotta come” (41).

- Berger tells him, “Maybe you gotta feel lousy sometimes in order to feel better” (39).

- Berger tells Conrad that “you gotta feel lousy sometimes . . . to feel better” (39).

When you have already mentioned the author and title of the work, it is generally not necessary to use the author’s name in parenthetical citations.

**Conclusion:**
Effective closing paragraphs summarize the key points of the essay, reveal the implications of your discussion, or ask a rhetorical question that leaves the reader something to consider. It should under no circumstances simply repeat the language of the thesis or the topic sentences, especially in a short essay. This creates too much repetition. In addition, avoid expressions like “In conclusion,” “In summary,” and “To conclude.” If you’ve done your job and developed the essay fully, the reader senses a tempo and tone change in the conclusion paragraph and finds these markers too simplistic.

**Works Cited:**
Again, refer to your Harbrace Handbook or the MLA Handbook if you are unsure of MLA format. Your works cited will contain both primary and secondary texts. If you are using a work from an anthology, cite the particular work, not just the anthology.