Most of the time, readers are passive; they expect the text to give them everything they need, and they do not expect to contribute much to the reading process. In contrast, **active reading** means participating in the reading process — thinking about what you read, asking questions, and challenging ideas. Active reading is excellent preparation for the discussion and writing you will do in college literature classes. And, because it helps you understand and appreciate the works you read, active reading will continue to be of value to you long after your formal classroom study of literature has ended.

Three strategies in particular — **previewing**, **highlighting**, and **annotating** — will help you to become a more effective reader. Remember, though, that reading and responding to what you read is not an orderly process — or even a sequential one. You will most likely find yourself doing more than one thing at a time — annotating at the same time you highlight, for example. For the sake of clarity, however, we discuss each active reading strategy separately.

**Previewing**

You begin active reading by **previewing** a work to get a general idea of what to look for later, when you read it more carefully.

Start with the work’s most obvious physical characteristics. How long is a short story? How many acts and scenes does a play have? Is a poem divided into stanzas? The answers to these and similar questions will help you begin to notice more subtle aspects of the work’s form. For example, previewing may reveal that a contemporary short story is presented entirely in a question-and-answer format, that it is organized as diary entries, or that it is divided into sections by headings. Previewing may identify poems that seem to lack formal structure, such as E. E. Cummings’s unconventional “l(a” (p. 000); poems written in traditional forms (such as **sonnets**) or in experimental forms, such as the numbered list of questions and answers in Denise Levertov’s “What Were They Like?” (p. 000); or **visual poetry**, such as George Herbert’s “Easter Wings” (p. 0000). Your awareness of
these and other distinctive features at this point may help you gain insight into a work later on.

Perhaps the most physically distinctive element of a work is its title. Not only can the title give you a general idea of what the work is about, as straightforward titles like "Miss Brill" and "The Cask of Amontillado" do, but it can also isolate (and thus call attention to) a word or phrase that emphasizes an important idea. For example, the title of Amy Tan's short story "Two Kinds" (p. 000) refers to two kinds of daughters — Chinese and American — suggesting the two perspectives that create the story's conflict. A title can also be an allusion to another work. Thus, *The Sound and the Fury*, the title of a novel by William Faulkner, alludes to a speech from Shakespeare's *Macbeth* that reinforces the major theme of the novel. Finally, a title can introduce a symbol that will gain meaning in the course of a work — as the quilt does in Alice Walker's "Everyday Use" (p. 000).

Other physical elements — such as paragraphing, capitalization, italics, and punctuation — can also provide clues about how to read a work. In William Faulkner's short story "Barn Burning" (p. 000), for instance, previewing would help you to notice passages in italic type, indicating the protagonist's thoughts, which occasionally interrupt the narrator's story.

Finally, previewing can enable you to see some of the more obvious stylistic and structural features of a work — the point of view used in a story, how many characters a play has and where it is set, or the repetition of certain words or lines in a poem, for example. Such features may or may not be important; at this stage, your goal is to observe, not to analyze or evaluate.

Previewing is a useful strategy not because it provides answers but because it suggests questions to ask later, as you read more closely. For instance, why does Faulkner use italics in "Barn Burning," and why does Herbert shape his poem like a pair of wings? Elements such as those described above may be noticeable as you preview, but they will gain significance as you read more carefully and review your notes.

**Highlighting**

When you read a work closely, you will notice additional, sometimes more subtle, elements that you may want to examine further. At this point, you should begin highlighting — physically marking the text to identify key details and to note relationships among ideas.

What should you highlight? As you read, ask yourself whether repeated words or phrases form a pattern, as they do in Tim O'Brien's short story "The Things They Carried" (p. 000), in which the word carried appears again and again. Because this word appears so frequently, and because it appears at key points in the story, it helps to reinforce a key theme of the story: the burdens and responsibilities soldiers carry in war time. Repeated words and phrases are particularly important in poetry. In Dylan Thomas's "Do not go gentle into that good night" (p. 000), for example, the repetition of two of the poem's nineteen lines four times each enhances the poem's rhythm, almost monotonous, cadence. As you read, highlight your text to identify such repeated words and phrases. Later, you can consider why they are repeated.
During the highlighting stage, also pay particular attention to images that occur repeatedly, keeping in mind that such repeated images may form patterns that can help you to interpret the work. When you reread, you can begin to determine what pattern the images form and perhaps decide how this pattern enhances the work’s ideas. When highlighting Robert Frost’s “Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening” (p. 0000), for instance, you might identify the related images of silence, cold, and darkness. Later, you can consider their significance.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>✔</th>
<th>CHECKLIST  Using Highlighting Symbols</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>■</td>
<td>Underline important ideas.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>■</td>
<td>Box or circle words, phrases, or images that you want to think more about.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>■</td>
<td>Put question marks beside confusing passages, unfamiliar references, or words that need to be defined.</td>
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<tr>
<td>■</td>
<td>Circle related words, ideas, or images and draw lines or arrows to connect them.</td>
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<tr>
<td>■</td>
<td>Number incidents that occur in sequence.</td>
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<tr>
<td>■</td>
<td>Set off a key portion of the text with a vertical line in the margin.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>■</td>
<td>Place stars beside particularly important ideas.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The following poem by Maya Angelou has been highlighted by a student preparing to write about it. Notice how the student uses highlighting symbols to help him identify stylistic features, key ideas, and patterns of repetition that he may want to examine later.

MAYA ANGELOU (1928 – )

My Arkansas (1978)

There is a deep brooding in Arkansas.

Old crimes like moss? pend since poplar trees.

The sullen earth is much too red for comfort.
This student identifies repeated words and phrases ("brooding"; "It writhes") and places question marks beside the two words ("pend" and "rent") that he plans to look up in a dictionary. He also boxes two phrases — "Old crimes" and "ante-bellum lace" — that he needs to think more about. Finally, he stars what he tentatively identifies as the poem's key ideas. When he rereads the poem, his highlighting will make it easier for him to react to and interpret the writer's ideas.

**Annotating**

At the same time you highlight a text, you also annotate it, recording your reactions as marginal notes. In these notes you may define new words, identify allusions and patterns of language or imagery, summarize plot relationships, list a work's possible themes, suggest a character's motivation, examine the possible significance of particular images or symbols, or record questions that occur to you as you read. Ideally, your annotations will help you find ideas to write about.

The following paragraph from John Updike's 1961 short story "A&P" (p. 000) was highlighted and annotated by a student in an Introduction to Literature course who was writing a short essay in response to the question "Why does Sammy really quit his job?"
Lengel sighs and begins to look very patient and old and gray. He’s been a friend of my parents for years. “Sammy, you don’t want to do this to your Mom and Dad,” he tells me. It’s true, I don’t. But it seems to me that once you begin a gesture it’s fatal not to go through with it. I fold the apron, “Sammy” stitched in red on the pocket, and put it on the counter, and drop the bow tie on top of it. The bow tie is theirs, if you’ve ever wondered. “You’ll feel this for the rest of your life,” Lengel says, and I know that’s true, too, but remembering how he made the pretty girl blush makes me so scrunchy inside I punch the No Sale tab and the machine whirs “pee-pul” and the drawer splats out. One advantage to this scene taking place in summer, I can follow this up with a clean exit, there’s no fumbling around getting your coat and galoshes, I just saunter into the electric eye in my white shirt that my mother ironed the night before, and the door heaves itself open, and outside the sunshine is skating around on the asphalt.

Action isn’t the result of thought. Sammy reacts to the girl’s embarrassment.

Because the instructor had discussed the story in class and given the class a specific assignment, the student’s annotations are quite focused. In addition to highlighting important information, she notes her reactions to the story and tries to interpret Sammy’s actions.

Sometimes you annotate a work before you have decided on a topic. In fact, the process of reading and responding to the text can help you to focus on a topic. In the absence of a topic, your annotations are likely to be somewhat unfocused, so you will probably need to repeat the process when your paper’s direction is clearer.

Writing about Literature

Writing about literature — or about anything else — is an idiosyncratic process during which many activities occur at once: as you write, you think of ideas; as you think of ideas, you clarify the focus of your essay; and as you clarify your focus, you reshape your paragraphs and sentences and refine your word choice. Even though this process sounds chaotic, it has three stages: planning, drafting, and revising and editing.
Planning an Essay

Considering Your Audience

Sometimes you write primarily for yourself — for example, when you write a journal entry. At other times, you write for others. As you write an essay, consider the special requirements of your audience. Is your audience your classmates or your instructor? Can you assume your readers are familiar with your paper’s topic and with any technical terms you will use, or will they need brief plot summaries or definitions of key terms? If your audience is your instructor, remember that he or she is a representative of a larger academic audience and therefore expects accurate information; standard English; correct grammar, mechanics, and spelling; logical arguments; and a certain degree of stylistic fluency. In addition, your instructor expects you to support your statements with specific information, to express yourself clearly and explicitly, and to document your sources. In short, your instructor wants to see how clearly you think and whether you are able to arrange your ideas into a well-organized, coherent essay.

In addition to being a member of a general academic audience, your instructor is also a member of a particular community of scholars — in this case, those who study literature. By writing about literature, you engage in a dialogue with this community. For this reason, you should adhere to the specific conventions — procedures that by habitual use have become accepted practice — its members follow. Many of the conventions that apply specifically to writing about literature — matters of style, format, and the like — are discussed in this book. (The checklist on page 00 addresses some of these conventions.)

Understanding Your Purpose

Sometimes you write with a single purpose in mind. At other times, a writing assignment may suggest more than one purpose. In general terms, you may write for any of the following three reasons:

1. Writing to respond: When you write to respond, your goal is to discover and express your reactions to a work. To record your responses, you engage in relatively informal activities, such as brainstorming, listing, and journal writing (see pp. 00–00). As you write, you explore your own ideas, forming and re-forming your impressions of the work.

2. Writing to interpret: When you write to interpret, your aim is to explain a work’s possible meanings. To do so, you may summarize, give examples, or compare and contrast the work to other works or to your own experiences. Then, you may go on to analyze the work: studying each of its elements in turn, putting complex statements into your own words, defining difficult concepts, and placing ideas in context.

3. Writing to evaluate: When you write to evaluate, your purpose is to assess a work’s literary merits. You may consider not only its aesthetic appeal, but also its ability to retain that appeal over time and across national or cultural boundaries. As you write, you use your own critical sense and the opinions of experts to help you make judgments about the work.
NOTE: When you write a literary argument, your purpose is to persuade. See Chapter 5.

Choosing a Topic

When you write an essay about literature, you develop and support an idea about a literary work or works. Before you begin your writing, make certain that you understand your assignment. Do you know how much time you have to complete your essay? Are you expected to rely on your own ideas, or are you able to consult outside sources? Is your essay to focus on a specific work or on a particular element of literature? Do you have to write on an assigned topic, or are you free to choose a topic? About how long should your essay be? Do you understand exactly what the assignment is asking you to do?

Sometimes your assignment limits your options by telling you what you should discuss:

- Write an essay in which you analyze Thomas Hardy’s use of irony in his poem “The Man He Killed.”
- Discuss Hawthorne’s use of allegory in his short story “Young Goodman Brown.”
- Write a short essay in which you explain Nora’s actions at the end of Ibsen’s A Doll House.

At other times, your instructor may give you few guidelines other than a paper’s length and format. In such situations, where you must choose a topic on your own, you can often find a topic by brainstorming or by writing journal entries. As you engage in these activities, keep in mind that you have many options for writing papers about literature. Among them are the following:

- You can explicate a poem or a passage of a play or short story, doing a close reading and analyzing the text.
- You can compare two works of literature. (The related works listed at the end of each “Reading and Reacting” section in this book suggest possible connections.)
- You can compare two characters or discuss some trait those characters share.
- You can trace a common theme — jealousy, revenge, power, coming of age — in several works.
- You can consider how a common subject — war, love, nature — is treated in several works.
- You can examine a single literary element in one or more works — for instance, plot, point of view, or character development.
- You can focus on a single aspect of that literary element, such as the use of flashbacks, the effect of a shifting narrative perspective, or the role of a minor character.
- You can apply a critical theory to a work of literature — for instance, a feminist perspective to Tillie Olsen’s “I Stand Here Ironing” (p. 000).
• You can examine connections between an issue treated in a work of literature—for instance, racism in Ralph Ellison's "Battle Royal" (p. 000) or postpartum psychosis in Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper" (p. 000)—and that same issue as it is treated in sociological or psychological journals or in the popular press.
• You can examine some aspect of history or biography and consider its relationship to a literary work—for instance, the influence of World War I on Wilfred Owen's poems.
• You can explore a problem within a work and propose a possible solution—for example, consider Montresor's actual reason for killing Fortunato in Edgar Allan Poe's "The Cask of Amontillado" (p. 000).
• You can explore parallels and contrasts between a literary work and a film version of the work—for example, the different endings in Joyce Carol Oates's short story "Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?" (p. 000) and the film Smooth Talk.

Any of those options may lead you to an interesting topic. Remember, however, that you may have to narrow the scope of your topic so that it fits within the limits of your assignment.

Finding Something to Say

Once you have a topic, you have to find something to say about it. The information you collected when you highlighted and annotated will help you formulate the statement that will be the central idea of your essay and will help you find ideas that can support that statement.

You can use a variety of different strategies to find supporting material:

• You can discuss ideas with others—friends, classmates, instructors, or parents, for example.
• You can ask questions.
• You can do research, either in the library or on the Internet.
• You can freewrite—that is, write on a topic for a given period of time without pausing to consider style, structure, or content.

Two additional strategies—brainstorming and keeping a journal—are especially helpful.

Brainstorming When you brainstorm, you record ideas—single words, phrases, or sentences (in the form of statements or questions)—as they occur to you, moving as quickly as possible. Your starting point may be a general assignment, a particular work (or works) of literature, or a specific topic. You can brainstorm at any stage of the writing process (alone or in a group), and you can repeat this activity as often as you like.

The brainstorming notes that follow were made by a student preparing to write a paper on the relationships between children and parents in four poems.
She began by brainstorming about each poem and went on to consider thematic relationships among the poems. These notes are her preliminary reactions to one of the four poems she planned to study, Adrienne Rich’s “A Woman Mourned by Daughters” (p. 000):

**Memory: then and now**

*Then:* leaf, straw, dead insect (= light); ignored

*Now:* swollen, puffed up, weight (= heavy);
  focus of attention controls their movements.

*Kitchen* = a “universe”

Teaspoons, goblets, etc. = concrete representations of mother; also = obligations, responsibilities (like plants and father)

(weigh on them, keep them under her spell)

Milestones of past: weddings, being fed as children “You breathe upon us now”

PARADOX? (Dead, she breathes, has weight, fills house and sky. Alive, she was a dead insect, no one paid attention to her.)

**Keeping a journal** You can record ideas in a journal (a notebook, a small notepad, or a computer file)—and, later, these ideas can lead you to a topic or a thesis. In a journal, you expand your marginal annotations, recording your responses to works you have read, noting questions, exploring emerging ideas, experimenting with possible paper topics, trying to paraphrase or summarize difficult concepts, or speculating about a work’s ambiguities. A journal is the place to take chances, to try out ideas that may initially seem frivolous or irrelevant; here you can think on paper (or on your computer) until connections become clear or ideas crystallize. You can also use your journal as a convenient place to collect your brainstorming notes and, later, your lists of related ideas.

As he prepared to write a paper analyzing the role of Jim, the “gentleman caller” in Tennessee Williams’s play *The Glass Menagerie* (p. 0000), a student explored ideas in the following journal entry.
When he tells Laura that being disappointed is not the same as being discouraged, and that he’s disappointed but not discouraged, Jim reveals his role as a symbol of the power of newness and change—a “bulldozer” that will clear out whatever is in its path, even delicate people like Laura. But the fact that he is disappointed shows Jim’s human side. He has run into problems since high school, and these problems have blocked his progress toward a successful future. Working at the warehouse, Jim needs Tom’s friendship to remind him of what he used to be (and what he still can be?), and this shows his insecurity. He isn’t as sure of himself as he seems to be.

Although this journal entry represents only the student’s preliminary explorations, it can help him to decide on a specific direction for his essay.

**Seeing Connections: Listing**

After actively reading a work, you should have a good many underlinings and marginal notes. Some of this material will be useful, and some will be irrelevant. **Listing** is the process of reviewing your notes, deciding which ideas are most interesting, and arranging related ideas into lists. Listing enables you to discover patterns: to see repeated images, similar characters, recurring words and phrases, and interrelated themes or ideas. Identifying these patterns can help you to decide which points to make in your paper and what information you will use to support these points.

A student preparing a paper about D. H. Lawrence’s short story “The Rocking-Horse Winner” (p. 000) made the following list of related details.

**Secrets**
- Mother can’t feel love
- Paul gambles
- Paul gives mother money
- Family lives beyond means
- Paul gets information from horse

**Religion**
- Gambling becomes like a religion
- They all worship money
- Specific references: “serious as a church”; “It’s as if he had it from heaven”; “secret, religious voice”

**Luck**
- Father is unlucky
- Mother is desperate for luck
- Paul is lucky (ironic)

This kind of listing can be a helpful preliminary organizing strategy, but remember that the lists you make now do not necessarily reflect the order or emphasis of
ideas in your paper. As your thoughts become more focused, you will add, delete, and rearrange material.

Deciding on a Thesis

Whenever you are ready, you should try to express the main idea of your emerging essay in a thesis statement—a idea, usually expressed in a single sentence, that the rest of your essay supports. This idea should emerge logically out of your highlighting, annotating, brainstorming notes, journal entries, and lists. Eventually, you will write a thesis-and-support paper: stating your thesis in your introduction, supporting the thesis in the body paragraphs of your essay, and reinforcing the thesis or summarizing your paper’s key points in your conclusion.

An effective thesis statement tells readers what your essay will discuss and how you will approach your material. Consequently, it should be precisely worded, making its point clear to your readers, and it should contain no vague words or imprecise phrases that will make it difficult for readers to follow your discussion. For example, although the statement, The use of sound in Tennyson’s poem “The Eagle” is interesting is accurate, it does not convey a precise idea to your readers because the words sound and interesting are not specific. A more effective thesis statement would be, Unity in “The Eagle” is achieved through Tennyson’s use of alliteration, assonance, and rhyme throughout the poem.

In addition to being specific, your thesis statement should give your readers an accurate sense of the scope and direction of your essay. It should not make promises that you do not intend to fulfill or contain extraneous details that might confuse your readers. If, for example, you are going to write a paper about the dominant image in a poem, your thesis should not imply that you will focus on the poem’s setting or tone.

Remember that as you organize your ideas and as you write, you will probably modify and sharpen your thesis. Sometimes you will even begin planning your essay with one thesis in mind and end it with an entirely different idea. If this happens, be sure to revise your support paragraphs so that they are consistent with your changes and so that the examples you include support your new thesis. If you find that your thoughts about your topic are changing, don’t be concerned; this is how the writing process works.

Preparing an Outline

Once you have decided on a thesis and have some idea of how you will support it, you can begin to plan your essay’s structure. At this stage of the writing process, an outline can help you to clarify your ideas and the relationship of these ideas to one another.

A scratch outline is perhaps the most useful kind of outline for a short paper. An informal list of the main points you will discuss in your essay, a scratch outline is more focused than a simple list of related points because it presents ideas in the order in which they will be introduced. As its name implies, however, a scratch outline lacks the detail and the degree of organization of a more formal outline.
The main purpose of a scratch outline is to give you a sense of the shape and order of your paper and thus enable you to begin writing. A student writing a short essay on Edwin Arlington Robinson’s use of irony in his poem “Miniver Cheevy” (p. 0000) used this scratch outline as a guide:

**Speaker’s Attitude**
- Ironic
- Cynical
- Critical

**Use of Diction**
- Formal
- Detached

**Use of Allusions**
- Thebes
- Camelot
- Priam
- Medici

**Use of Repetition**
- “Miniver”
- “thought”
- regular rhyme scheme

Once this outline was complete, the student was ready to write a first draft.

**Drafting an Essay**

A first draft is a preliminary version of your paper, something to react to and revise. Even before you actually begin drafting your paper, however, you should review the material you have collected. To make sure you are ready to begin drafting, take the following three steps:

1. **Make sure you have collected enough information to support your thesis.** The points you make are only as convincing as the evidence you present to support them. As you were reading and taking notes, you collected supporting examples—in the form of summary, paraphrase, or quotation—from the work or works about which you are writing. How many of these examples you need to use in your draft depends on the breadth of your thesis and how skeptical you believe your audience to be. In general, the broader your thesis, the more material you need to support it. For example, if you were supporting the rather narrow thesis that the speech of a certain character in the second scene of a play was wooden or awkward, only a few examples would be needed. However, if you wanted to support the broader thesis that Nora and Torvald Helmer in Henrik Ibsen’s *A Doll House* (p. 0000) are trapped in their roles, you would need to present a wide range of examples.

2. **See if the work includes any details that contradict your thesis.** Before you begin writing, test the validity of your thesis by looking for details that contradict it. For example, if you plan to support the thesis that in *A Doll House,*
Ibsen makes a strong case for the rights of women, you should look for counterexamples. Can you find subtle hints in the play that suggest women should remain locked in their traditional roles and continue to defer to their fathers and husbands? If so, you will want to modify your thesis accordingly.

3. **Consider whether you need to use outside sources to help you support your thesis.** You could, for example, strengthen the thesis that *A Doll House* challenged contemporary attitudes about marriage by including the information that when the play first opened, Ibsen was convinced by an apprehensive theater manager to write an alternative ending. In this new ending, Ibsen had Nora decide, after she stopped briefly to look in at her sleeping children, that she could not leave her family. Sometimes information from another source can even lead you to change your thesis. For example, after reading *A Doll House*, you might have decided that Ibsen's purpose was to make a strong case for the rights of women. In class, however, you might learn that Ibsen repeatedly said that his play was about the rights of all human beings, not just of women. This information could lead you to a thesis that suggests Torvald is just as trapped in his role as Nora is in hers. Naturally, Ibsen's interpretation of his work does not invalidate your first judgment, but it does suggest another conclusion that is worth investigating.

After carefully evaluating the completeness, relevance, and validity of your supporting material, you can begin drafting your essay, using your scratch outline as a guide. Once you have a draft, you will be able to examine the connections among ideas and to evaluate preliminary versions of your paragraphs and sentences.

In this draft, your focus should be on the body of your essay; this is not the time to worry about constructing the “perfect” introduction and conclusion. (Many writers, knowing that their ideas will change as they write, postpone writing these paragraphs until a later draft, preferring instead to begin with just their tentative thesis.) As you write, remember that your first draft is going to be rough and will probably not be as clear as you would like it to be; still, it will enable you to see the ideas you have outlined begin to take shape.

**Revising and Editing an Essay**

As soon as you begin to draft your essay, you begin the process of revision. When you revise, you literally “re-see” your draft and, in many cases, you go on to re-order and rewrite substantial portions of your essay. Before you are satisfied with your essay, you will probably write several drafts, each more closely focused and more coherent than the previous one.

**Strategies for Revision**

Two strategies can help you to revise your drafts: peer review and a dialogue with your instructor:

1. **Peer review** is a process in which students assess each other’s work-in-progress. This activity may be carried out in informal sessions during which
one student comments on another’s draft, or it may be a formal process in
which students respond to specific questions on a form supplied by the in-
structor or participate in an electronic exchange. In either case, one student’s
reactions can help another student revise.

2. A dialogue with your instructor — in conference or by email — can give you
a sense of how to proceed with your revision. Establishing such an oral or writ-
ten dialogue can help you learn how to respond critically to your own writing,
and your reactions to your instructor’s comments on any draft can help you to
clarify your essay’s goals and write drafts that are increasingly consistent with
these goals (If your instructor is not available, try to schedule a conference with
a writing center tutor).

The Revision Process

As you move through successive drafts, the task of revising your essay will be eas-
ier if you follow a systematic process. As you read and react to your essay, begin
by assessing the effectiveness of the larger elements — for example, your thesis
statement and your key supporting ideas — and then move on to examine in-
creasingly smaller elements.

Thesis Statement First, reconsider your thesis statement. Is it carefully and pre-
cisely worded? Does it provide a realistic idea of what your essay will cover? Does
it make a point that is worth supporting? The following thesis statements are im-
precise and unfocused.

Vague: Many important reasons exist to explain why Margot
Macomber’s shooting of her husband was probably
intentional.

Vague: Dickens’s characters are a lot like those of Addison
and Steele.

To give focus and direction to your essay, a thesis statement must be more pointed
and specific.

Revised: Although Hemingway’s text states that Margot
Macomber “shot at the buffalo,” a careful analysis
of her relationship with her husband suggests that
in fact she intended to kill him.

Revised: With their extremely familiar, almost caricature-
like physical and moral traits, many of Charles
Dickens’s minor characters reveal that Dickens
owes a debt to the “characters” created by the
eighteenth-century essayists Joseph Addison and
Richard Steele for the newspaper The Spectator.

Supporting ideas Next, assess the appropriateness of your supporting ideas,
considering whether you present enough support for your thesis and whether all
the details you include are relevant to that thesis. Make sure you have supported all points with specific, concrete examples from the work or works you are discussing, briefly summarizing key events, quoting dialogue or description, describing characters or settings, or paraphrasing important ideas. Make certain, however, that your own ideas are central to the essay and that you have not substituted plot summary for analysis and interpretation. Your goal is to draw a conclusion about one or more works and to support that conclusion with pertinent details. If an event in a story you are analyzing supports a point you wish to make, include a brief summary and then explain its relevance to the point you are making.

In the following excerpt from a paper on a short story by James Joyce, the first sentence briefly summarizes a key event, and the second sentence explains its significance.

At the end of James Joyce’s “Counterparts,” when Farrington returns home after a day of frustration and abuse at work, his reaction is to strike out at his son Tom. This act shows that although he and his son are similarly victimized, Farrington is also the counterpart of his tyrannical boss.

**Topic sentences** Now, turn your attention to the **topic sentences** that present the main ideas of your body paragraphs. Make sure that each topic sentence is clearly worded and that it signals the direction of your discussion and indicates the precise relationships of ideas to one another.

Be especially careful to avoid abstractions and vague generalities in topic sentences.

**Vague:** One similarity revolves around the dominance of the men by women. *(What exactly is the similarity?)*

**Revised:** In both stories, a man is dominated by a woman.

**Vague:** There is one reason for the fact that Jay Gatsby remains a mystery. *(What is the reason?)*

**Revised:** Because *The Great Gatsby* is narrated by the outsider Nick Carraway, Jay Gatsby himself remains a mystery.

When revising topic sentences that are intended to move readers from one point (or one section of your paper) to another, be sure the relationship between the ideas they link is clear.

**Unclear:** Now the poem’s imagery will be discussed.

**Revised:** Another reason for the poem’s effectiveness is its unusual imagery.
Unclear: The sheriff’s wife is another interesting character.

Revised: Like her friend Mrs. Hale, the sheriff’s wife also has mixed feelings about what Mrs. Wright has done.

Introduction and conclusion  When you are satisfied with the body of your essay, you can turn your attention to your paper’s introduction and conclusion.

The introduction of an essay about literature should identify the works to be discussed and their authors and indicate the emphasis of the discussion to follow. Depending on your purpose and on your paper’s topic, you may want to provide some historical background or biographical information or to briefly discuss the work in relation to other, similar works. Like all introductions, the one you write for an essay about literature should create interest in your topic and include a clear thesis statement.

The following introduction, though acceptable for a first draft, is in need of revision.

Draft: Revenge, which is defined as “the chance to retaliate, ‘get satisfaction, take vengeance, or inflict damage or injury in return for an injury, insult, etc.,’ is a major component in many of the stories we have read. The stories that will be discussed here deal with a variety of ways to seek revenge. In my essay, I will show some of these differences.

Although the student clearly identifies her paper’s topic, she does not identify the works she will discuss or the particular point she will make about revenge. Her tired opening strategy, a dictionary definition, is not likely to create interest in her topic, and her announcement of her intention in the last sentence is awkward and unnecessary. The following revision is much more effective.

Revised: In Edgar Allan Poe’s “The Cask of Amontillado,” Montresor vows revenge on Fortunato for an unspecified “insult”; in Ring Lardner’s “Haircut,” Paul, a young retarded man, gets even with a cruel practical joker who has taunted him for years. Both of these stories present characters who seek revenge, and both stories end in murder. However, the murderers’ motivations are presented very differently. In “Haircut,” the unreliable narrator is unaware of the significance of many events, and his ignorance helps to create sympathy for the murderer; in “The Cask of Amontillado,” where the untrustworthy narrator is the murderer himself,
Montresor’s inability to offer a convincing motive turns the reader against him.

In your conclusion, you restate your thesis or sum up your essay’s main points; then, you make a graceful exit.

The concluding paragraph that follows is acceptable for a first draft but needs further development.

Draft: Although the characters of Montresor and Paul were created by different authors at different times, they do have similar motives and goals. However, they are portrayed very differently.

The following revision reinforces the essay’s main point, effectively incorporating a brief quotation from “The Cask of Amontillado” (p. 000):

Revised: In fact, then, what is significant is not whether each murderer’s act is justified, but rather how each murderer, and each victim, is portrayed by the narrator. Montresor—driven by a thirst to avenge “a thousand injuries” as well as a final insult—is shown to be sadistic and unrepentant; in “Haircut,” it is Jim, the victim, whose sadism and lack of remorse are revealed to the reader.

Sentences and words Now, focus on the individual sentences and words of your essay. Begin by evaluating your transitions, the words and phrases that link sentences and paragraphs. Be sure that every necessary transitional element has been supplied and that each word or phrase you have selected accurately conveys the exact relationship (sequence, contradiction, and so on) between ideas.

When you are satisfied with the clarity and appropriateness of your paper’s transitions, consider sentence variety and word choice:

- Be sure you have varied your sentence structure. You will bore your readers if all your sentences begin with the subject (“He... He...”; “The story... The story...”).
- Make sure that all the words you have selected communicate your ideas accurately and that you have not used vague, inexact diction. For example, saying that a character is bad is a lot less effective than describing him or her as ruthless, conniving, or malicious.
- Eliminate subjective expressions, such as I think, in my opinion, I believe, it seems to me, and I feel. These phrases weaken your essay by suggesting that its ideas are “only” your opinions and have no objective validity.

Using and documenting sources Make certain that all references to sources are integrated smoothly into your sentences and that all information that is not your
own is documented appropriately. See “Integrating Sources” (p. 000) in Chapter 6, “Writing a Research Paper,” and “Avoiding Plagiarism” (pp. 000–000) in Chapter 7, “Avoiding Plagiarism and Documenting Sources.”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CHECKLIST Using Sources</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Acknowledge all sources, including the work or works under discussion, using the documentation style of the Modern Language Association (MLA).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Combine paraphrases, summaries, and quotations with your own interpretations, weaving quotations smoothly into your paper. Introduce the words or ideas of others with a phrase that identifies their source (According to Richard Wright’s biographer, . . . ) and end with appropriate parenthetical documentation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use quotations only when something vital would be lost if you did not reproduce the author’s exact words.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Integrate short quotations (four lines or fewer of prose or three lines or fewer of poetry) smoothly into your paper. Use a slash (/ ) with one space on either side to separate lines of poetry. Be sure to enclose quotations in quotation marks.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Set off quotations of more than four lines of prose or three lines of poetry by indenting one inch (ten spaces) from the left-hand margin. Double-space, and do not use quotation marks. If you are quoting just one paragraph, do not indent the first line.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use ellipses — three spaced periods — to indicate that you have omitted material within a quotation (but never use ellipses at the beginning of a quoted passage). See Chapter 7 for further information.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use brackets to indicate that you have added words to a quotation: As Earl notes, “[Willie] is a modern-day Everyman” (201). Use brackets to alter a quotation so that it fits grammatically into your sentence: Wilson says that Miller “offers audiences a dark view of the present” (74).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Place commas and periods inside quotation marks: According to Robert Coles, the child could “make others smile.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Place punctuation marks other than commas and periods outside quotation marks: What does Frost mean when he says “a poem must ride on its own melting”? If the punctuation mark is part of the quoted material, place it inside the quotation marks: In “Mending Wall,” Frost asks, “Why do they make good neighbors?”</td>
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Continued on next page
When citing part of a short story or novel, supply the page number (143). For a poem, supply line numbers (3–5). For a play, supply act, scene, and line numbers (2.2.17–22) unless your instructor tells you otherwise.

Include a works-cited list (unless your instructor tells you not to).

**Editing and Proofreading**

Once you have finished revising, you edit—that is, you make certain that your paper’s grammar, punctuation, spelling, and mechanics are correct. Always run a spell check—but remember that you still have to proofread carefully for errors that the spell checker will not identify. These include homophones (brake incorrectly used instead of break), typos that create correctly spelled words (work instead of word), and words (such as a technical or foreign term or a writer’s name) that may not be in your computer’s dictionary. If you use a grammar checker, remember that grammar programs may identify potential problems—long sentences, for example—but may not be able to determine whether a particular long sentence is grammatically correct (let alone stylistically pleasing). Always keep a style handbook as well as a dictionary nearby so that you can double-check any problems a spell checker or grammar checker highlights in your writing.

As you edit, pay particular attention to the mechanical conventions of literary essays, some of which are addressed in the checklist below. When your editing is complete, give your essay a descriptive title. Before you print your final copy, be sure that its format conforms to your instructor’s requirements.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>✔ Checklist</th>
<th>Conventions of Writing about Literature</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Use present-tense verbs when discussing works of literature:</strong></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>The character of Mrs. Mallard’s husband is not developed. . . .</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Use past-tense verbs only when discussing historical events (Owen’s poem conveys the destructiveness of World War I, which at the time the poem was written was considered to be . . .); when presenting historical or biographical data (Her first novel, which was published in 1811 when Austen was thirty-six, . . .); or when identifying events that occurred prior to the time of the story’s main action (“Miss Emily is a recluse; since her father’s death she has lived alone except for a servant”).</strong></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Support all points with specific, concrete examples from the work you are discussing, briefly summarizing key events, quoting dialogue or description, describing characters or setting, or paraphrasing ideas.</strong></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Continued on next page
Support all points with specific, concrete examples from the work you are discussing, briefly summarizing key events, quoting dialogue or description, describing characters or setting, or paraphrasing ideas.

Avoid unnecessary plot summary. Your goal is to draw a conclusion about one or more works and to support that conclusion with pertinent details. If a plot detail supports a point you wish to make, a brief summary is acceptable. But remember, plot summary is no substitute for analysis.

Use literary terms accurately. For example, be careful not to confuse narrator or speaker with author; feelings or opinions expressed by a narrator or character do not necessarily represent those of the author. You should not say, “In the poem’s last stanza, Frost expresses his indecision” when you mean that the poem’s speaker is indecisive.

Underline titles of novels and plays; place titles of short stories and poems within quotation marks.

Refer to authors of literary works by their full names (Edgar Allan Poe) in your first reference to them and by their last names (Poe) in subsequent references. Never refer to authors by their first names, and never use titles that indicate marital status (Flannery O’Connor or O’Connor, never Flannery or Miss O’Connor).

Exercise: Two Student Papers

The following student papers, “Initiation into Adulthood” and “Hard Choices,” were written for the same Introduction to Literature class. Both consider the initiation theme in the same three short stories: James Joyce’s “Eveline” (p. 000), John Updike’s “A&P” (p. 000), and William Faulkner’s “Barn Burning” (p. 000). “Hard Choices” conforms to the conventions of writing about literature discussed in this chapter. “Initiation into Adulthood” does not.

Read the two essays. Then, guided by this chapter’s discussion of writing about literature and by the checklists on pages 00 and 00, identify the features that make “Hard Choices” the more effective essay, and decide where “Initiation into Adulthood” needs further revision. Finally, suggest some possible revisions for “Hard Choices.”
Initiation into Adulthood

At an early age, the main focus in a child’s life is his parents. But as this child grows, he begins to get his own view of life, which may be, and usually is, different from that of his parents. Sooner or later there will come a time in this child’s life when he must stand up for what he truly believes in. At this point in his life, he can no longer be called a child, and he becomes part of the adult world. In literature, many stories—such as James Joyce’s “Eveline,” John Updike’s “A&P,” and William Faulkner’s “Barn Burning”—focus on this initiation into adulthood.

James Joyce’s “Eveline” is a story that describes a major turning point in a woman’s life. At home, Eveline’s life was very hard. She was responsible for keeping the house together and caring for the younger children left to her after her mother’s death. Unfortunately, the only thoughts that ran through her mind were thoughts of escape, of leaving her unhappy life and beginning a new life of her own. The night before she was to secretly leave with Frank on a boat to Buenos Ayres, a street organ playing reminded her of her promise to her dying mother to keep the home together as long as she could. She was now forced to make a decision between life with Frank and her present life, which didn’t look wholly undesirable now that she was about to leave. The next night, just as she was about to step on the boat, she realized she could not leave. The making of this decision was in essence Eveline’s initiation into adulthood.
John Updike’s “A&P” presented the brief infatuation of a young boy, Sammy, and the consequences that followed. Sammy’s home was a small quiet town a few miles from the shore. He worked in the local A&P as a cashier, a job his father had gotten for him. One day, three girls in nothing but bathing suits walked through the front door. Immediately they caught Sammy’s eye, especially the leader, the one he nicknamed “Queenie.” After prancing through the store, eventually they came to Sammy’s checkout with an unusual order. It was not long before they caught the attention of Mr. Lengel, the manager. Unpleasant words were exchanged between the manager and Queenie pertaining to their inappropriate shopping attire. Before the girls left the store, Sammy told Lengel that he quit, hoping they would stop and watch their unsuspected hero. But they kept walking, and Sammy was faced with the decision of whether or not to follow through with his gesture. Knowing that it is “fatal” not to follow through with a gesture once you’ve started, he removed his apron and bow tie and walked out the door, realizing how hard the world was going to be to him hereafter. The making of this decision, to leave the mundane life of the A&P and enter the harsh world, was in essence Sammy’s initiation into adulthood.

William Faulkner’s “Barn Burning” is a story about Sarty Snopes, an innocent young boy who must make a decision between his family and his honor. Because Abner Snopes, Sarty’s father, had so little, he
tried to hurt those who had more than he had—often by burning their barns. These acts forced the Snopes family to move around quite a bit. The last time Snopes burned a barn, he did it without warning his victim, making Sarty realize how cruel and dishonest his father really was. Because of this realization, Sarty decided to leave his family. This decision of Sarty’s not to stick to his own blood was his initiation into adulthood.

“Eveline,” “A&P,” and “Barn Burning” all deal with a youth maturing to adulthood in the process of deciding whether to stay unhappy or to go and seek a better life. Sammy and Sarty leave their unpleasant situations because of something done unfairly. Eveline, on the other hand, decides to stay, remembering a responsibility to her mother. The decisions of these characters presented in their respective stories are focal points in the literary works and pertain to initiation into adulthood.
Although William Faulkner’s "Barn Burning" focuses on a young boy in the American South, John Updike’s "A&P" on a teenager in a town north of Boston, and James Joyce’s "Eveline" on a young woman in Dublin, each of the three stories revolves around a decision the central character must make. These decisions are not easy ones; in all three cases, family loyalty competes with a desire for individual freedom. However, the difficult decision-making process helps each character to mature, and in this sense, all three works are initiation stories.

For Sarty Snopes in "Barn Burning," initiation into adulthood means coming to terms with his father’s concept of revenge. Mr. Snopes believes that a person should take revenge into his own hands if he cannot get justice in court. Revenge, for this bitter man, means burning down barns. Sarty knows that his father is doing wrong, but Mr. Snopes drills into his son’s mind the idea that “You got to learn to stick to your own blood or you ain’t going to have any blood to stick to you” (Faulkner 000), and for a long time Sarty believes him. Naturally, this blood tie makes Sarty’s decision to leave his family extremely difficult. In the end, though, Sarty decides to reject his father’s values and remain behind when his family moves.

Like Sarty, Sammy must choose between his values and his parents’ values (reflected in his job at the supermarket). While Sammy is working in the A&P, he notices how “sheep-like” people are. Most customers
have a routine life that they never consider changing, and Sammy does not want to wind up like them. When three seemingly carefree girls enter the store and exhibit nonconformist behavior—such as going against the flow of people in the aisles, not having a grocery list, and wearing bathing suits—Sammy sees them as rebels, and he longs to escape through them from his humdrum world. In the end, he chooses to defend the girls and quit the job his parents helped him to get.

Likewise, Eveline has to decide between a new life with her boyfriend, Frank, in South America and her dull, hard life at home with her father. The new life offers change and freedom, while her life at home is spent working and keeping house. Still, when given the chance to leave, she declines because she has promised her dying mother to keep the house as long as she could.

All three characters enter adulthood by making difficult decisions. Sarty realizes that in order to grow, he must repudiate his father’s wrongdoings. He stands up for his values and rejects his “blood.” Sammy makes the same decision, although with less extreme consequences: knowing that he will have to confront his parents, he defends the three girls and stands up to his boss, rejecting a life of conformity and security. Unlike the other two, Eveline does not reject her parents’ values. Instead, she decides to sacrifice her own future by remaining with her father. She keeps her promise to her mother and places her
father before herself because she believes that caring for him is her duty.

Each of the three characters confronts a challenging future. Sarty must support himself and make a new life. Because he is very young and because he has no one to help him, his future is the most uncertain of the three. Unlike Sammy and Eveline, who still have homes, Sarty has only his judgment and his values to guide him. Sammy’s future is less bleak but still unpredictable: he knows that the world will be a harder place for him from now on (Updike 000) because now he is a man of principle. Unlike the other two, Eveline knows exactly what her future holds: work, pain, and boredom. She has no fear or uncertainty—but no hope for a better tomorrow either.

“Barn Burning,” “A&P,” and “Eveline” are stories of initiation in which the main characters struggle with decisions that help them to grow up. All three consider giving up the known for the unknown, challenging their parents and becoming truly themselves, but only Sarty and Sammy actually do so. Both boys defy their parents and thus trade difficult lives for uncertain ones. Eveline, however, chooses to stay on in her familiar life, choosing the known—however deadening—over the unknown. Still, all three, in confronting hard choices and deciding to do what their values tell them they must do, experience an initiation into adulthood.