CHAPTER 3

WRITING SPECIAL KINDS OF PAPERS

When you write a paper about literature, you have many options (some of these are listed in Chapter 2, p. 00). Often, however, you will be asked to respond to one of four special assignments: to write a comparison-contrast paper, to write an explication, to write a character analysis, or to write about a work's historical context. In the pages that follow, we offer guidelines for responding to each of these assignments as well as an annotated model student paper and a list of suggested topics for each kind of paper.

Writing a Comparison-Contrast Paper

When you write a comparison-contrast paper, you look first for significant similarities between your two subjects. For example, two characters may have a similar motivation or similar goals or flaws; two stories may have similar settings; two plays may have similar plots; and two poems may have parallels in their use of sound or imagery. Once you have identified the main similarities, you consider why these similarities are important and what they reveal about the works.

There are two ways to arrange material in a comparison-contrast essay. When you write a **point-by-point comparison**, you discuss one point of similarity at a time, alternating between subjects. When you write a **subject-by-subject comparison**, you approach each subject separately, discussing all your points for one subject and then for the other. The outlines that follow illustrate how you could use either a point-by-point or a subject-by-subject strategy to support the same thesis statement.

**Thesis Statement**: Both David Michael Kaplan's “Doe Season” and Alice Munro’s “Boys and Girls” focus on a young girl who learns that her gender limits her and comes to accept that such limitations are inevitable.

**Point-by-Point Comparison**

**First point**: In both stories, the girls are tomboys who like being with their fathers.

“Doe Season”: Andy goes hunting with her father.

“Boys and Girls”: The narrator does farm chores with her father.
Second point: In both stories, the girls struggle against the expectations of others.  
“Doe Season”: Mac and Charlie challenge Andy’s right to hunt.  
“Boys and Girls”: Narrator’s mother expects her to do household chores.

Third point: In both stories, the girls learn that they are limited by their gender.  
“Doe Season”: Andy shoots the deer and runs away in horror, thinking of her mother.  
“Boys and Girls”: The narrator fails to save Flora (the horse) and realizes she is “only a girl.”

Subject-by-Subject Comparison

First subject: “Doe Season”
   First point: Andy is a tomboy who is excited about going hunting with her father.  
   Second point: Charlie and Mac challenge her right to be there.  
   Third point: Through her encounter with the deer, she learns that she is not as brave as she thought she was.

Second subject: “Boys and Girls”
   First point: Like Andy, the narrator likes being with her father and is glad not to be in the house with her mother.  
   Second point: Like Andy, she is criticized by those who think she belongs at home.  
   Third point: Like Andy, she learns through her encounter with an animal — in her case, the horse whose life she cannot save — that she is limited by her gender.

✔ CHECKLIST Writing a Comparison-Contrast Paper

- Have you chosen two subjects that have significant parallels?
- Does your thesis statement identify the two subjects you are comparing and tell why they are alike (and perhaps also acknowledge their differences)?
- Does your paper’s structure follow either a point-by-point or a subject-by-subject pattern?
- Does each of your topic sentences identify the subject you are discussing and the point you are focusing on in the paragraph?
- Do transitional words and phrases clearly lead readers from subject to subject and from point to point?
- Have you followed your instructor’s format and documentation guidelines?
Sample Student Paper: Comparing Two Fictional Characters

The following student paper, "The Dangerous Consequences of Societal Limbo," is a point-by-point comparison of two characters created by William Faulkner: Emily Grierson in "A Rose for Emily" and Abner (Ab) Snopes in "Barn Burning." Note that because the student author was permitted to write only about works in this anthology, his instructor did not require a works-cited page.

David Quinn
Professor Warren
Literature 1120
27 March 2005

The Dangerous Consequences of Societal Limbo

In his many works of fiction, William Faulkner explores the lives of characters who live in the closed society of the American South, a society rooted in traditional values. In the stories "Barn Burning" and "A Rose for Emily," Faulkner explores what happens when individuals lose their connection to this society and its values. Both Abner Snopes, a rebellious sharecropper, and Emily Grierson, an unmarried woman from a prominent family, are isolated from their respective communities, and both find themselves in a kind of societal limbo. Once in that limbo, they no longer feel the need to adhere to the values of their society and, as a result, are free to violate both traditional and moral rules.

Initially, Emily’s isolation is not her own creation; it is thrust upon her. From childhood on, Emily is never really allowed to be part of Jefferson society; she is seen as having a "high and mighty" attitude (Faulkner, *Rose* 000). Her father stands between her and the rest of the town, refusing to allow her to date the young men who pursue her, whom he sees
as somehow not good enough for her. As a result, her only close relationship is with her father, who essentially becomes her whole world. Recalling father and daughter, the narrator depicts them as static and alone, trapped in a living portrait, “Miss Emily a slender figure in white in the background, her father a spraddled silhouette in the foreground, his back to her and clutching a horsewhip” (Faulkner, “Rose” 000), framed by the archway of the entrance to their house. When Emily’s father dies, and the townspeople insist on removing his body from her home, the only world she knows is physically taken from her, and she has nothing to take its place. Without her father, without friends, without a husband, she withdraws from her community—and, thus, is free to defy its rules with a shocking act of violence.

While Emily’s removal from society is forced upon her, Abner Snopes voluntarily rejects his society’s values from the beginning. During the Civil War, he does not fight alongside the Confederate army; instead, he adopts an aggressive neutrality, stealing from both sides for his own personal gain. He is finally caught by the side he betrays when a Confederate policeman shoots him in the heel as Abner tries to escape on a stolen horse. Unable to see his own fault in that episode, Abner uses his injury as an excuse for a personal vendetta against society. However, because he has a wife and three children whom he must feed and provide for, Ab must constantly return to the society that he turned his back on.
This conflict between his rebellious nature and his need to work as a sharecropper makes him unstable. Like Emily, he does not see himself as part of the community, and therefore he feels free to violate its rules.

Once Emily and Abner are estranged from their respective communities, they no longer see themselves as bound by the society’s laws and rules. This makes it possible for Abner to burn barns and for Emily to commit murder.

Emily’s courting and capturing of Homer Barron fills the void left by her father’s death; for her, the act of poisoning Homer is a perverse method of regaining control. With this act, she takes away the very life that attracted her to him, but she is able to hold on to him as a physical entity. As an exile from society, Emily can rationalize this antisocial act: in her eyes, murder is no longer considered wrong; it is merely a method of preservation, a means to an end that ensures that Homer will remain with her until her death. Once Emily has completed the gruesome task of poisoning her “husband,” she further withdraws from her community, and her neighbors, the narrator included, never suspect her secret. Without suspicion from the townspeople, Emily is left alone, free to live as she chooses.

Abner’s impotent rage and search for vengeance push him to lash out violently at almost anyone with whom he comes in contact. His method of destruction comes in the primitive form of fire, which he uses not
to kill but simply to threaten. In the two barn burnings of the story, Abner incites confrontations and then uses the burnings as a way of getting even for imagined offenses. In one incident, for example, Mr. Harris, a landowner, finds that Abner’s hog ate a section of his corn crop. When Harris demands a dollar pound fee for the return of the hog, Abner sends him a threatening message: “Wood and hay kin burn” (Faulkner, “Barn” 000). Despite Harris’s efforts to resolve their dispute, Abner is determined to carry out his threat. Ultimately, the barn burnings further alienate Ab from the society whose laws he is defying.

Like Ab Snopes, Emily makes her own rules and develops her own twisted concepts of justice and revenge. Although she is not directly punished by the community for her crime, Emily suffers terribly. She may possess the body of Homer Barron, but his death renders her incapable of holding onto him as a person and a husband. The result of her gradual estrangement from society—involuntary at first but eventually confirmed by her willing violent act—is complete isolation from the real world and withdrawal into an empty world of her own.

Although Ab operates from within a similar societal limbo, he is unable to escape society’s punishment. Sarty Snopes, Abner’s son, is a firsthand witness to his father’s second barn burning. Sarty is caught in a moral dilemma, pulled between the values of his community and the selfish motives of his father.
Quinn 5

Rather than remain in the alienated condition that his father has created for his family, Sarty renounces his loyalty to Abner and turns his father in to plantation owner Major De Spain.

Despite their estrangement from society, then, neither Emily nor Ab is ultimately able to escape its influence. In withdrawing from their respective communities, Emily Grierson and Abner Snopes are able to defy society’s traditions and break its rules, but they also create empty lives for themselves and tragedy for those closest to them.
Suggested Topics for Comparison-Contrast Papers

Comparing Two Stories: tradition and superstition in “The Water-Faucet Vision” and “Dead Man’s Path”; the meaning of education in “Gryphon” and “B. Wordsworth”; the nature of time in “Kansas” and “Half a Day” (For a model student paper that compares two stories, see “Mesmerizing Men and Vulnerable Teens . . . ,” p. 000.)

Comparing Two Poems: “The Soldier” and “Dulce et Decorum Est”; “Hope” and “‘Hope’ is the thing with feathers —”; “How Do I Love Thee?” and “What Lips My Lips Have Kissed.” (For a model student paper that compares two poems, see “Digging for Memories,” p. 000.)

Comparing Two Plays: rivalry and role reversal in The Stronger and Beauty; father/son relationships in Fences and Death of a Salesman

Comparing a Story and a Poem: “The Rocking-Horse Winner” and “Suicide Note” (children desperate to please their parents); “A Rose for Emily” and “Porphyria’s Lover” (obsessive love)

Comparing a Story and a Play: loneliness and desperation in Trifles and“A Rose for Emily”; mentors and students in Proof and “B. Wordsworth”; family loyalty in A Raisin in the Sun and “Eveline”; the journey to the United States in The Cuban Swimmer and “The Third and Final Continent”; Japanese internment camps in “Seventeen Syllables” and Antigone’s Red


Comparing Two Works by a Single Author: John Updike’s “A&P” and “Ex-Basketball Player”; Tennessee Williams’s The Glass Menagerie and “Portrait of a Girl in Glass”; Edgar Allan Poe’s “The Cask of Amontillado” and “The Tell-Tale Heart”

Comparing a Work of Literature to a Work of Art: Jane Flanders’s poem “Cloud Painter” and John Constable’s painting Landscape, Noon, the Haywain; William Carlos Williams’s poem “The Great Figure” and Charles Henry Demuth’s painting The Figure 5 in Gold; W. H. Auden’s poem “Musée des Beaux Arts” and Pieter Brueghel’s painting Landscape with the Fall of Icarus

Comparing a Work of Literature to a Film: The short-story and DVD versions of“A&P,” “I Stand Here Ironing,” “Cathedral,” “A Worn Path,” and “Everyday Use”

NOTE: For additional possibilities for comparison-contrast papers, see the “Related Works” lists that follow many of the selections.
Writing an Explication

When you write an explication (of a poem, a short story, or a scene in a play), you scrutinize a work or a portion of a work, carefully examining its parts in order to get a sense of the whole. For example, you might decide to do a close reading and analysis of a story’s characters, symbols, or setting; of a poem’s language, rhyme scheme, meter, or form; or of a play’s dialogue or staging. One way to approach a work you wish to explicate is to apply the guidelines for reading fiction (p. 00), poetry (p. 000), or drama (p. 000) in a systematic way. Another way is to use the Explicator mark-up tool on the Lit21 CD-ROM accompanying this book.

When you organize your material in an explication, you should proceed systematically. If you are focusing on a single element, analyze its importance in one section of the work at a time. If you are analyzing several elements, consider each — plot, setting, point of view, and so on — in turn, you will probably choose to group the less significant elements together in a single paragraph or section of your paper and then devote several paragraphs to one particularly important element, carefully considering how symbols, for example, shed light on the work. For each element you discuss, you will give examples from the work you are explicating, quoting words, phrases, lines, and passages that illustrate each point you are making about the work.

✔ Checklist  Writing an Explication

- Is the work you have chosen sufficiently rich to support an explication?
- Do you focus on one element of literature at a time?
- Do topic sentences make clear which element (or elements) you are focusing on in each paragraph?
- Do you use quotations from the work to illustrate your points?
- Does your thesis state the central point about the work that your explication supports?
- Have you followed your instructor’s format and documentation guidelines?

Sample Student Paper: Explicating a Poem

The following student paper, “A Lingering Doubt,” is an explication of Robert Frost’s poem “The Road Not Taken.” Note that because the student author was permitted to write only about works in this anthology, her instructor did not require a works-cited page.
A Lingering Doubt

Sometimes it is tempting to look back on a lifetime of choices and decisions and to think “What if? What if I had made a different choice? Would my life be better? Worse? More interesting?” In Robert Frost’s poem “The Road Not Taken,” the speaker does just this: he looks back at a time in his life when he came to a fork in the road and chose one path over another. He tells readers that he “took the one less traveled by, / And that has made all the difference” (lines 19-20). At first, this statement seems to suggest that the speaker is satisfied with the decision he made long ago. However, many elements in the poem—its structure, its language, and even its title—suggest that the speaker is regretting his decision, not celebrating it.

The title of the poem, “The Road Not Taken,” immediately suggests that the speaker is focusing not on the choice he did make long ago but on the road he chose not to take. The poem’s language supports this interpretation. Frost begins his poem with the speaker recalling that “Two roads diverged in a yellow wood” and saying that he is sorry [he] could not travel both” (1-2). The image Frost uses of the two roads diverging is an obvious metaphor for the choices a person has to make in the course of a life-time.
As a young man, the speaker was not aware of any major difference between the two roads. He sees one as “just as fair” (6) as the other and uses words and phrases such as “equally” (11) and “really about the same” (10). However, in the third stanza of the poem, the older and wiser speaker, looking back on that period of his life, says that he still might take the other road “another day” (13). That the mature speaker still continues to examine a decision he made earlier in life suggests that he may not be completely satisfied with that decision.

A close look at the poem suggests that it is the departures from the expected structure and meter that make the poem’s meaning clear. The poem is divided into four stanzas, each made up of five lines. The regular meter of these four stanzas conveys a sense of tranquillity and certainty. The regularity of the poem’s rhyme scheme (a, b, a, a, b) also contributes to the poem’s natural fluidity. This fluidity is evident, for example, in the first stanza:

Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,
And sorry I could not travel both
And be one traveler, long I stood
And looked down one as far as I could
To where it bent in the undergrowth;

(1-5)

Here, the end rhyme of lines 1, 3, and 4 and of lines 2 and 5, as well as the even line lengths (each line contains nine syllables) make the poem flow smoothly.
However, the poem does not maintain this fluidity. In other stanzas, lines range from eight to ten syllables in length, and the important final stanza ends with a line that is an awkward departure from the rest of the poem:

I shall be telling this with a sigh
Somewhere ages and ages hence:
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—
I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference.  
(16-20)

In this stanza, line 20 has nine syllables as lines 16 and 18 do, but unlike them, it also has an irregular meter ("And that has made all the difference"), which forces readers to hesitate on the word "all" before landing on "difference." This hesitation, coupled with the hesitation signaled by the dash that ends line 18, reveals the speaker’s doubts about his decision. When the speaker was young, he did not notice any significant difference between the two roads, or the life choices, presented to him. Now, looking back, he believes that there was a difference, and he may be lamenting the fact that he will never know where life would have taken him had he chosen differently.

Departure from expected meter is not the only tactic Frost uses to convey a sense of hesitation and an air of regret. Frost’s choice of words also plays an important part in helping readers understand the poem’s theme. In the first stanza, for example, the
speaker thinks back to the period of his life in which he had to choose between two separate paths, and he says that he was “sorry [he] could not travel both” (2). The word “sorry” helps to establish the tone of regret that pervades the poem.

In the second stanza, Frost begins to use words and phrases to convey a sense of indecision and doubt in the speaker’s voice. The speaker attempts to pacify himself by saying that the road he chose had “perhaps the better claim” (7), but then he is quick to say that the passage of time had worn both roads “really about the same” (10). The words “perhaps” and “really” suggest indecision, and Frost’s choice of these words helps to convey the doubt in the speaker’s mind.

The speaker’s sense of regret deepens in the third stanza as he continues to think back on his decision. When the speaker says, “Oh, I kept the first for another day!” (13), the word “Oh” expresses his regret. The exclamation point at the end of the statement helps reinforce the finality of his decision. When the speaker continues, “Yet knowing how way leads on to way, / I doubted if I should ever come back” (14-15), the word “Yet” is filled with uncertainty.

In the poem’s final stanza, the speaker suddenly leaves his thoughts of the past and speaks in the future tense: “I shall be telling this [story] with a sigh” (16). Frost’s use of the word “sigh” here is
very revealing because it connotes resignation or regret. After the speaker sighs, he concludes, “Two roads diverged in a wood, and I— / I took the one less traveled by, / And that has made all the difference” (18-20). Both the dash and the repetition of the word “I” convey hesitation and thus communicate his lingering doubts over the decision he made long ago.

Although this doubt is evident throughout the poem, “The Road Not Taken” has frequently been interpreted as optimistic because of the speaker’s final statement that the choice he made “has made all the difference” (20). However, “made all the difference” can be interpreted as neutral (or even negative) as well as positive, and so the speaker’s statement at the end of the poem may actually be a statement of regret, not celebration. The “difference” mentioned in the final line has left a doubt in the speaker’s mind, and, as Frost suggests in the title of his poem, the speaker is left thinking about the road he did not take and will never be able to take.
Suggested Topics for Explication Papers

**Fiction**

*Focus on Form:* “A Primer for the Punctuation of Heart Disease”; “Girl”; “Kansas”

*Focus on Language:* “Battle Royal”; “Hills Like White Elephants”; “The Things They Carried”; “The Lesson”


*Focus on Character:* “An Ounce of Cure”; “Bartleby, the Scrivener”; “The Red Convertible”; “The Third and Final Continent”; “Teenage Wasteland”

*Focus on Setting:* “The Open Boat”; “Greasy Lake”; “The Cask of Amontillado”

*Focus on Point of View:* “The Disappearance”; “I Stand Here Ironing”; “The Tell-Tale Heart”

*Focus on Plot:* “Happy Endings”; “Sleepy Time Gal”; “Miss Brill”; “The Storm”

*Focus on Irony:* “Saboteur”; “Big Black Good Man”

**NOTE:** For model student papers that explicate short stories, see “The Secret Lion: Everything Changes” (p. 00, and “And Again She Makes the Journey: Character and Act in Eudora Welty’s ‘A Worn Path’” (p. 000).

**Poetry**

*Focus on Voice:* “Ballad of the Landlord”; “Not Waving but Drowning”; “My Papa’s Waltz”; “Daddy”; “Volcanoes be in Sicily”

*Focus on Word Choice:* “Jabberwocky”; “My Mistress’ Eyes Are Nothing Like the Sun”

*Focus on Irony:* “How to Write the Great American Indian Novel”

*Focus on Imagery:* “Emmett Till”; “The Lake Isle of Innisfree”; “Dover Beach”; “Ode on a Grecian Urn”

*Focus on Figures of Speech:* “Dulce et Decorum Est”; “Stop all the clocks, cut off the telephone”; “Metaphors”

*Focus on Sound:* “Acquainted with the Night”; “La Belle Dame sans Merci”; “The Raven”

*Focus on Form:* “Buffalo Bill’s”; “When I consider how my light is spent”; “What Were They Like?”; “Group Photo with Winter Trees”

*Focus on Symbol, Allegory, Allusion, Myth:* “The Second Coming”; “Diving into the Wreck”; “Sea Grapes”
Chapter 3 • Writing Special Kinds of Papers

Drama

**Focus on Plot:** the Antigone story in Antigone’s Red; subplots in Hamlet; foreshadowing in Nine Ten

**Focus on Character:** Dr. Rank in A Doll House; Claire in Proof; Ophelia in Hamlet; Walter in A Raisin in the Sun

**Focus on Staging:** Tom’s monologues in The Glass Menagerie; the simultaneous speeches in Small World; the Requiem in Death of a Salesman

**Focus on Language:** Imagery and figures of speech in The Brute; one speech in Hamlet or Oedipus

**Focus on Symbolism:** The quilt in Trifles; the macaroons and the Tarantella in A Doll House.

Writing a Character Analysis

When you write an analysis of a character in a short story or play, you examine the character’s language, behavior, background, interaction with other characters, and reaction to his or her environment. Everything you are told about a character — and everything you can reasonably infer about him or her from words, actions, or appearance — can help you to understand the character. In your analysis, you can focus on the influences that shaped the character, the character’s effect on others, how the character changes during the course of the story or play, or what motivates him or her to act (or not to act).

✔ **CHECKLIST Writing a Character Analysis**

- Have you chosen a character who is interesting enough to make him or her a suitable focus for your paper?
- Have you considered the character’s words, actions, appearance, and interactions with others?
- Have you considered how and why the character changes — or why he or she fails to change?
- Have you considered how the work would be different if the character had made different choices?
- Have you considered how the work would be different without the character?
- Have you considered what motivates the character to act (or not to act)?
- Have you followed your instructor’s format and documentation guidelines?
Sample Student Paper: Analyzing a Character in a Play

The following student paper, "Linda Loman: Breaking the Mold," analyzes a character in Arthur Miller's play Death of a Salesman. Note that because the student author was permitted to write only about works in this anthology, her instructor did not require a works-cited list.

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14 March 2005

Linda Loman: Breaking the Mold

In many ways, Linda Loman appears to play the part of the stereotypical dutiful and loving wife in Arthur Miller’s Death of a Salesman. She eagerly greets her husband, ignores his shortcomings, and maintains an upbeat attitude, all while managing the bills, waxing the floors, and mending the clothes. Her kindness and infinite patience seem to establish her as a foil for Willy, with his turbulent temperament. In addition, most of her actions seem to be only reactions to the other characters in the play. However, a closer look at Linda reveals a more complex woman: a fully developed character with dreams, insights, and flashes of defiance.

Unlike stock characters, whose motivations seem transparent and obvious, Linda has dreams that are both complex and realistically human. The stage directions that introduce Linda describe her as sharing Willy’s “turbulent longings” but lacking the temperament to pursue them (0000). It seems she has applied the wisdom she shares with Willy, that “life is a casting off,” to her own cast-away dreams (0000).
Linda’s hopes seem more realistic than Willy’s. She wants Biff to settle down, the mortgage to be paid off, and the members of her family to coexist happily. These modest aspirations are the product of Linda’s long experience. The fact that Linda does not chase unrealistic goals, as Willy does, does not make her a flat character (or even a less interesting one); instead, her weaknesses give her character a degree of depth and human realism.

At times, Linda takes on the role of family peacemaker—a role we would expect her to play consistently throughout the play if she were simply a stock character. But Linda breaks out of the obedient wife mode on several occasions. When Willy insists that she stop mending her stockings, Linda quietly puts them into her pocket to resume her mending later. When Biff and Happy show they are ashamed of their father, Linda fiercely lashes out at them in his defense, calling Happy a “philandering bum” and threatening to kick Biff out of the house for good (0000). Though initially, she cannot bring herself to remove the rubber pipe that Willy used to commit suicide, Linda says she had finally decided to destroy the pipe when Biff removed it. She does not always have an opportunity to follow through on her threats, but Linda demonstrates clearly that she will not always follow orders—especially when she is protecting Willy.

Linda seems to be the cheerful voice of the family, but beneath the surface, she is keenly aware
of the ongoing problems. She knows that Charley has been giving money to Willy every week, but she says nothing for fear of embarrassing Willy. She senses Willy’s suicidal tendencies and even finds physical evidence of his plans. Linda is the first to raise doubts about Biff’s plans to ask Mr. Oliver for money, suggesting he may not remember Biff. Above all, Linda understands human nature and how the minds of those around her work. She gives an honest description of her husband and his situation:

I don’t say he’s a great man. Willy Loman never made a lot of money. His name was never in the paper. He’s not the finest character that ever lived. But he’s a human being, and a terrible thing is happening to him. So attention must be paid. (0000)

Linda sees past her sons’ exaggerated lies and is not afraid to criticize them for their selfish choices. She pretends to be unaware of their shortcomings, but her feigned obliviousness is simply another layer in her multifaceted personality.

Linda appears to be the steadiest character in the play, providing stability for the other characters, but her constant brushing aside of problems actually makes her the most responsible for the ultimate tragedy of the play. She lies to Willy in order to soothe him, telling him he has “too much on the ball to worry about” (0000) and is “the handsomest man in the world” (0000). In the process, she allows him to continue believing in the unattainable dreams
that ultimately lead him to self-destruct. She also makes exceptions for her sons, suggesting Willy can simply talk to Biff’s teacher to change his grade and encouraging Biff’s business plans even when she knows he will not succeed. As a result, failure hits Biff hard because he has not been forced to think realistically.

In the end, Linda goes beyond the stereotypical confines of her role as ever-supportive wife and mother. There are many layers to her character: beneath her simple goals of owning the home and living happily with her family lie years of disappointments and failed dreams. Hidden beneath her eagerness to please is her willingness to defy orders to defend her husband. And, although she seems not to notice what is going on, she is perceptive about the family’s problems long before others show awareness. Her actions clearly show that she is more than a minor supporting character. Linda is deeply involved in the actions and impulses of the other characters in the play. As a fully developed character, she has complex motivations and human qualities (including faults) that set her apart from stock characters. As her son Happy notes, “They broke the mold when they made her” (0000).
Suggested Topics for Character Analysis Papers

Fiction

**Major Characters:** the narrator in “An Ounce of Cure”; Lieutenant Cross in “The Things They Carried”; Dee in “Everyday Use”; the mother in “Two Kinds” or “Seventeen Syllables”; the husband in “The Disappearance”

**Minor Characters:** the mother in “The Rocking-Horse Winner”; Tobe in “A Rose for Emily”; Lena in “Big Black Good Man”; the husband in “The Yellow Wallpaper”

**NOTE:** For a model student paper analyzing a major character in a short story, see “And Again She Makes the Journey: Character and Act in Eudora Welty’s ‘A Worn Path’” (p. 0000).

Drama

**Major Characters:** Troy in Fences; Miss Y in The Stronger; Linda in Death of a Salesman; Antigone in Antigone; Amanda in The Glass Menagerie; Mama in A Raisin in the Sun

**Minor Characters:** Luka in The Brute; Polonius in Hamlet; Mrs. Linde in A Doll House. Claire in Proof

**NOTE:** For two model student papers analyzing characters in plays, see “Laura’s Gentleman Caller” (p. 0000) and “Desperate Measures: Acts of Defiance in Trifles” (p. 0000).

Writing about a Work’s Historical Context

When you explore the historical context of a short story, poem, or play, you set the work in its historical time and place, thereby enriching your own and others’ understanding of it. You begin by looking for specific references to historical figures or events. For example, you might see that a character in a story or play is reacting to a major world development, such as a war, or you might observe that a poem focuses on the achievements — or shortcomings — of a well-known historical figure. Such references can help you decide to focus on the work’s historical context.

When you write your paper, you will examine the connections between the historical background and the literary work itself, considering how the writer’s interpretation of events has shaped the work. To set the work in context, you will
probably need to do some research. You might begin by reading an encyclopedia article on the events referred to in the work. Once you have found some general background information, you can examine contemporary newspapers, diaries, and letters as well as more current articles and books. You might even want to interview someone who lived through the events that influenced the work.

It usually makes sense to include a brief summary of the particular historical situation or event you intend to discuss. This overview will help to orient readers who are not familiar with the work’s background. You might also explicate the work, systematically exploring specific parallels between historical events and the work itself. Alternatively, you might focus on one character in a story or play, examining how that character is shaped by specific historical events—for example, how Ab Snopes in William Faulkner’s “Barn Burning” (p.0000) has been affected by the civil War.

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<tr>
<th>CHECKLIST Writing about a Work’s Historical Context</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>☑ Is a historical figure or event an important influence on the work?</td>
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<td>☑ Do you summarize and explain the relevant historical background?</td>
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<td>☑ Do you clearly explain the relationship between the historical background and the literary work?</td>
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<td>☑ Do you use examples and quotations from the literary work to illustrate specific parallels between the work of literature and its historical context?</td>
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Sample Student Paper: Setting a Literary Work in Its Historical Context

The following student paper, “Dreaming of Home,” sets Louise Erdrich’s poem “Indian Boarding School: The Runaways” in the context of the historical events that inspired it.
Dreaming of Home

Louise Erdrich’s poem “Indian Boarding School: The Runaways” describes the experiences of Native American children who have been sent to a US-government-sponsored boarding school. Although the experiences themselves are traumatic and heart wrenching, the full impact of the poem comes only with an understanding of the United States government’s motivation for creating these schools and of their treatment of the Native American children who lived there during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. With this background, Erdrich’s work becomes not only a moving description of the painful experience of Native American children at federal boarding schools, but also a more general political statement about the treatment of Native Americans in the United States and, even more broadly, a statement about the pain of forced cultural assimilation.

“Indian Boarding School: The Runaways” relates the experience of Indian children struggling to maintain their cultural identities and preserve their cherished memories of home despite a series of efforts to purge them of their Indian heritage. Erdrich uses haunting language to explain that, for these children, the world they once knew has changed...
to such an extent that it exists only in their imaginations. Therefore, the children can escape to their home only when they go to sleep, and dream. In the first stanza, the narrator conveys her longing when she says, “Home’s the place we head for in our sleep./Boxcars stumbling north in dreams/don’t wait for us. We catch them on the run” (lines 1-3). At night, the children dream of making their way home. In the daytime, they are “cold in regulation clothes” (11), forced to wear “dresses, long green ones” (17) and to engage in “shameful” manual labor (19). To fight the assimilation being forced upon them, the children have only their memories.

By relating the experiences of these “runaways” and their dreams of home, Erdrich recreates the emotional experience of Native American children sent to the US government’s boarding schools. The history of these Indian schools further explains the experience described in the poem and sheds light on the consequences of America’s policy of forced assimilation.

During the late 1800s and early 1900s, the United States government sponsored a variety of initiatives aimed at assimilating Native Americans into white culture. Although some government officials genuinely believed that assimilation was the best way for Native Americans to live better, happier lives, this policy is grounded in the assumption that white culture is superior to Indian culture. As a result, government officials used a variety of methods to
encourage assimilation, and the establishment of the non-reservation boarding school was one of them. According to the Modern American Poetry Website, the Carlisle Indian Industrial School, established in 1879 with 139 students from the Rosebud and Pine Ridge nations, was one of the first of these schools. A description of the Carlisle Indian Industrial School reveals that Erdrich’s poem is rooted in actual events.

According to the Cumberland County Historical Society in Pennsylvania, where the Carlisle Industrial School was located, in 1879 General Richard Henry Pratt received permission from the United States government to use a former military base as the site of the first Indian boarding school. (Although the school closed in 1918, Carlisle served as a model for many of the other Indian boarding schools around the United States. Consequently, an examination of its policies and practices will explain how most Indian boarding schools operated.)

After receiving permission from the government, Pratt traveled to the Rosebud and Pine Ridge reservations to recruit students. According to the Carlisle Industrial School Research Pages, the chief of the Rosebud reservation, although initially reluctant, eventually agreed to send some children from the reservation to the school. Pratt soon convinced other Indian nations, including the Cheyenne, Kiowa, and Lakota, to send their children to the school as well. At the Carlisle school, the
teachers used a variety of methods to “civilize” the Native American students. For example, as the Modern American Poetry Web site explains, students were given new names, their hair was cut, and they were forced to speak English instead of their tribal languages. (The Carlisle Industrial School Research Pages notes that members of the Lakota nation cut hair to symbolize mourning, so this practice was particularly upsetting to the Lakota children.) The photo in Fig. 1 shows a group of Indian children at the Carlisle school. Like the girls being forced to wear long green dresses in Erdrich’s poem, these Indian students are dressed in school uniforms, not their native clothing.

Fig. 1. Apache children four months after arriving at the Carlisle Indian School in Pennsylvania, Owen Lindauer, “Archaeology of the Phoenix Indian School,” Archaeology 27 Mar. 1998, 10 Mar. 2005
<http://www.archaeology.org/online/features/phoenix/>
Parents did not always send their children to Carlisle willingly. The Carlisle Industrial School Research Pages explain that when Geronimo, chief of the Apache nation, was arrested, Pratt traveled to Fort Mario prison, where the Apache children were being held. Pratt then picked sixty two of the children to be sent to Carlisle, despite pleas from their parents. In an effort to prevent them from leaving, several of the parents hid the children, but Pratt eventually found them, and the children were sent to the school.

Erdrich closes her poem by explaining how the children try to remember their cultural heritage even as they are being forced to adopt the customs of white Americans:

Our brushes cut the stone in watered arcs
And in the soak frail outlines shiver clear
A moment, things us kids pressed on the dark Face before it hardened, pale, remembering
Delicate old injuries, the spines of names and leaves. (20-24)

The history of the Indian boarding schools, and how they worked to rid children of their Native American identities, clearly informs this poem. In this sense, Erdrich’s work is not just literary; it is also political. By invoking an emotional response in her readers, Erdrich is able to expose a dark side of United States history and its treatment of Native Americans.
Works Cited


Suggested Topics for Historical Context Papers

Fiction

“Once Upon a Time” (apartheid in South Africa); “The Third and Final Continent” (Indian immigration to the United States); “I Stand Here Ironing” (the Great Depression); “Shiloh” (site of the 1862 Civil War battle); “The Yellow Wallpaper” (treatment of postpartum psychosis in the nineteenth century); “The Things They Carried” (the Vietnam War)

Poetry

“Emmett Till”; “Strange Fruit”; “The Ballad of Birmingham” (pre-Civil Rights-Movement racial climate in the American South); “The Convergence of the Twain” (the sinking of the Titanic); “For the Union Dead” (all-black regiment in the Civil War); “The Names” (9/11); “Facing It” (the Vietnam War)

Drama

Proof (history of women in mathematics); Antigone’s Red (Japanese internment camps); The Glass Menagerie (World War II)

NOTE: For additional possibilities for historical context papers, see the cultural context paragraphs that precede many of the selections.