

Writing Supporting Paragraphs

Building an Argument

Any successful argument, whether it is about capital punishment or the *Odyssey*, should be built and developed through the course of your essay. That is the purpose of supporting paragraphs; each one will prove an element of your overall argument by providing direct evidence and analysis.

There are a variety of ways to divide up evidence into parts and arrange them in a persuasive order. The ways you choose to build your argument will ultimately depend on the work of literature and on your specific thesis, but here are a few basic organizing principles:

- **Thematic Development**: Trace the development of your theme (i. e. the similarity of mothers and daughters) throughout your essay. Begin at the beginning and end at the end. Although you want to be very careful to avoid “retelling” the story, this principle allows you to divide up the text according to significant elements that come from the beginning, middle, and end of the story. **It can be a good idea to begin with a paragraph that interprets the beginning of a story within the context of your argument, and it is certainly necessary to interpret the ending and final lines within the context of your argument at the end of your essay.**
- **Character Development**: This can be a good organizational principal if your thesis focuses on the evolution or change of a central character. In this case, you would also begin at the beginning and end at the end, being careful to divide up your evidence according to ideas instead of according to “what happens.”
- **Characters**: If you are comparing or contrasting more than one character, you can divide up your evidence accordingly; this was primarily the approach used in the Amy Tan literary analysis.
- **Figurative Language**: You may want to devote a paragraph(s) to your story’s use of tone, irony or to a recurring image, symbol or metaphor that is particularly significant to your argument. This is a great idea, and while you will probably not devote all of your supporting paragraphs to figurative language you can always add a paragraph on a particularly powerful example of figurative language to your essay.

Elements of a Supporting Paragraph

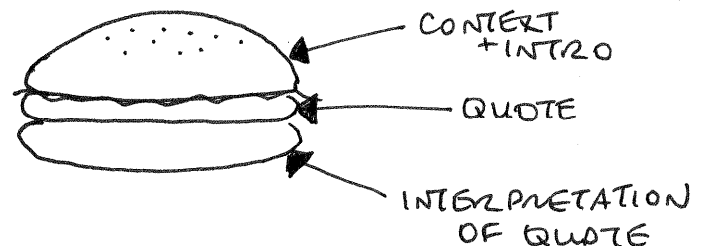
Topic Sentences: These are the sentences that begin each supporting paragraph. Topic sentences should be specific to the text and should be phrased as assertions; indeed, they are mini-"theses."

Evidence: Evidence in literary analyses comes from direct quotations, events from the plot, or details about character, setting, etc. Keep in mind, however that evidence from literature rarely speaks for itself, for the evidence is often figurative or needs interpretation. Therefore a crucial element of the supporting paragraph is the *application* of evidence: showing *why* and *how* a piece of evidence proves the point.

Concluding or Transition Sentences: It is a good idea to conclude each supporting paragraph with a sentence that "returns to your thesis" and/or helps transition to the next paragraph.

Integrating Direct Quotations into Supporting Paragraphs

Quotes are only effective if they are integrated smoothly into your own writing, if they are contextualized, and if they are "interpreted" in order to show how they prove your point. A good rule of thumb is to provide context prior to the quote and interpretation following the quote. The "quote hamburger" offers you an easy way to remember this formula.



Above all, you want to avoid "drop-ins": quotes that are not integrated into neither the preceding nor following sentences:

NO Queenie is clearly offended when Lengel tells her that she is dressed inappropriately. "We are decent" (35). These words show that she is talking about more than just her choice of clothing.

YES Queenie is clearly offended when Lengel tell her that she is dressed inappropriately. Updike's choice of words is interesting because when she replies, "We are decent," she seems to be speaking about more than just her choice of clothing (35).

Sample Supporting Paragraph:

[Yet, even though the climax of the story comes in the form of a separation between the mother and daughter, the story ends with the clear message that Meimei is more like her mother than she would like to admit.] Meimei leaves the dinner table and as she sulks in her room, she imagines a terrifying chess

TOPIC SENTENCE WITH MINI-THESIS

CONTEXT + INTRO OF QUOTE

opponent, her eyes "two angry black slits." Wearing a triumphant smile, and using her mother's own words, her opponent announces, "Strongest wind cannot be seen" (1487). The description of her opponent's eyes and her very words

DIRECT QUOTE AS EVIDENCE

INTERPRETATION

makes it clear that Meimei's opponent is, indeed, her mother or her mother's spirit. The game begins with an invisible wind that scatters Meimei's white pieces across the board and lifts Meimei high up into the air above the houses and into the air until she is all alone. This surrealistic ending that depicts the mother's strength is countered by the story's final line, which brings Meimei

CONTEXT + INTRO

DIRECT QUOTE

back to earth and back to her bedroom and seals her bond with her mother: "I closed my eyes and pondered my next move" (1487). Like her mother, Meimei has an iron will, great pride, and unwavering strength; the battle of wills between mother and daughter has just begun, and they are both players in a game that the story suggests will continue for many years to come.

INTERPRETATION

CONCLUDING SENTENCE