

READING AND WRITING ABOUT LITERATURE

(excerpted and adapted from Paul McCormick's *Becoming a Better University Writer*)



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1. Introduction: Reading and Writing about Literature at AUM

Has anyone told you that your time at university can alter the course of your life? That you have a unique opportunity to discover yourself and become more fully the person that you want to be?

Twenty-three years ago, I was a senior in a small, rural high school in my hometown of Washington Court House, Ohio. I was a reasonably-talented and high-achieving student, so much so that I had earned enough credits my senior year to attend only half-day through a “career program,” which was designed mostly for students who wanted to gain experience in a particular trade (rather than go on to college). I’d go to school in the morning, and then to my job at a retail outlet clothing store in the afternoon, where I worked 40 hours a week. I did this instead of taking AP classes, because I thought my school was a joke, and I was more interested in making money and leaving town as quickly as possible than in preparing for college. In retrospect, this was a bad decision. I graduated high school and promptly moved into a crummy apartment in Columbus, Ohio, where I enrolled in a community college—and was promptly placed in remedial English and Math courses, much to my chagrin.



The famed courthouse of Washington Court House

But during my two years at Columbus State Community College, something happened: my entire worldview changed. I had lived all eighteen years of my life in a small Ohio farm town, surrounded by the same people who all held the same beliefs, and, while I know most of my teachers did the best they could, I received a sub-par K–12 education. I’d never learned about religions other than Christianity. I’d never studied World History (I’d never even heard of Ancient Greece or the Ottoman Empire). I’d never read Walt Whitman or Friedrich Nietzsche, or studied cognitive psychology, or went to an art museum. I’d never interacted with people from

backgrounds, nationalities, and ethnicities different than my own. So, college was a life-changing experience for me: I fell in love with learning, began to question and dismantle my prejudices, and read everything I could get my hands on. I transferred to The Ohio State University my junior year and entered the Honors Program as an English major. I took as many classes as I could (way more than was needed for my degree) and spent a term abroad studying literature in England. And I stuck around Ohio State for a long time: ten years after transferring as a junior, I graduated college for a third time with a PhD (I also have Bachelor’s and Master’s degrees).



The phases of my academic life: undergraduate, Master's student, PhD, and Professor

So, when I tell you that your university experience can be transformative, please hear what I'm saying. Because what sounds like hyperbole, what sounds like an empty platitude, is actually part of my story. My university journey took me from barely-there-high-school to PhD, from being a bewildered first-year community college student to a tenured professor who has published five books, led a group of AUM students to study abroad in England, and was recently invited to give a talk at the world's northernmost university in Tromsø, Norway (over 200 miles north of the Arctic Circle—the coolest thing I've done as a professor). University taught me how to find and relentlessly pursue a dream, and it gave me a place and space to follow my intellectual interests. That can happen to you, too.

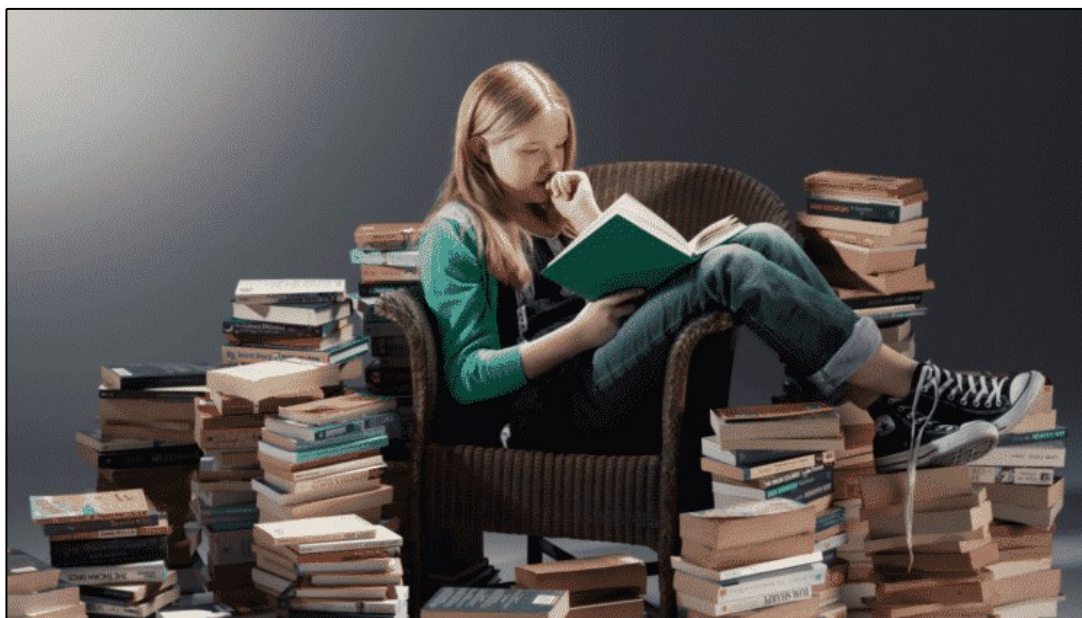
This literature survey course can be a starting point. To reach your academic and professional goals, you'll have to steadily improve your reading and writing skills over the course of your university career. Regardless of your major, you're going to have to read a lot of stuff and write a lot of papers. And that won't stop after graduation. You'll need to express yourself with clarity, verve, and skill. Commit yourself to becoming the best reader and writer you can be, and your skills will pay dividends in university and after.

What follows is a free textbook that I wrote specifically for this class—for you. You'll find a sequence of short chapters dedicated to helping you become a better university reader and writer. At the conclusion of most chapters, you'll find a short exercise to complete. Each exercise will ask you to practice the principles discussed in the chapter. You'll complete most of these exercises during the first half of the course—the idea is that you will continue to apply those skills during the second half of the course.

Now you've heard part of my story, but I haven't yet heard yours—yet. I look forward to learning more about your own experiences and dreams in these coming months. Welcome to your first (or maybe second) literature class at Auburn University Montgomery. Let's get to work.



2. Creating a Reading/Writing Environment that Works for You



An easy first step to becoming a better reader and writer is to make positive and permanent changes to your reading and writing environment. Many of my students swear they write their best when they've got their phones next to them, check in on their social media, listen to music, and work in front of the TV...or, all of these, all at the same time. A convenient theory, but highly dubious!

Let's face it. For most of us, myself included, reading carefully and writing well is challenging—some, most, or all of the time. So, I think that's one powerful reason why we invent justifications to do what we want to do anyways. Fair enough, I guess. But wouldn't it be nice to reduce the number of minutes you sit in front of your computer? Wouldn't it be nice to spend more time doing other things—the things that you actually want to do—while also getting your work done fast and well? An environment with fewer distractions will help with that process.

I also think that a lot of us just unconsciously seek out the kind of environment we had when we started to read and write in grade school. For instance, maybe your parents had you working at the kitchen table. Or maybe you'd always come home from school, flip on the TV, and then do your homework there...eventually. If so, there's probably a good chance that you're doing something similar today.

But I'd like to invite you to take a moment, now, and start to reflect consciously on the environments in which you typically read and wrote in the past. What do you do now? What could you do different? Then, maybe consider going a step further, and experiment with a different environment today when you read and write this week's assignments. Maybe you end up doing what you've always done because it works for you. But at least then it will be a more conscious decision.

At the end of this chapter, I'm going to ask you to write about all that. Reading and writing make us slow down and become more conscious of the subject we are reading/writing about. We don't write to record our thoughts; writing is itself a methodical, systematized form of self-reflection. This

semester, there will be plenty of times in which you get stuck or frustrated. It's worth remembering that being stuck is a symptom of thinking. That's a good thing!

Now I'll write a bit about my own work environment as an example of what I will ask you to do very soon. But keep in mind that my situation is atypical, unusual: I'm very lucky to be able to work how I work. Just mimic the detail of my description with your own as best you can.

As I sit writing this, I'm at my desk in my home office. To my right are three large, white bookcases that rise almost to the ceiling, packed full of my favorite books (including an entire row of cookbooks), family photos, and mementos. There are at least 300 books shelved here. Most of these books are



fiction and poetry, though there are a few of my four-year-old daughter's Dr. Seuss and Llama Llama books mixed in, by accident or design (she hasn't told me yet). To my left, hanging on the wall, is a very large print of J.M.W. Turner's *Norham Castle, Sunrise*, one of my favorite nineteenth-century paintings (it's also on the cover to one of the academic books I've written). At my feet is my dog Millie, snoring softly. Behind me are two windows looking out to a large field across the street from my house, currently empty (it's just after 6am). I have the room to myself (for now), and it's quiet. It's nice, peaceful, calm.

On my desk, I have my MacBook Pro (my only computer), front and center, and I'm writing in Microsoft Word. This laptop was issued to me by AUM two years ago. I've got a couple of sheets of paper that I use for notes, a few pens, and a stack of books. I'm reading some of the books for pleasure, some for courses I'm teaching, and some shouldn't be on my desk but are piling up, for some reason. I also have a cup of coffee and a can of seltzer water.

I do have two big distractions. One is the computer itself, always beckoning me to stop working and start playing. My most common distraction websites are email (which is also work, granted, but it's a distraction), NPR, and Facebook. However, I'm pretty good at sticking to daily (and weekly, and monthly, and yearly) work schedules I design to keep me on track, and I'm someone who works best in uninterrupted chunks, like two or four hours straight of reading or writing at a time. I don't do so well if I have to split up a task into several fifteen- or twenty-minute sessions, broken up by checking emails, or watching YouTube, or answering a phone call. But things happen, which leads to the second major distraction: life. I'm working from home, so household chores are waiting (dishes, laundry, cleaning), the dog will need a walk, I'll need to drop off my daughter at daycare at 8am and then pick her up at 4pm, and so on. I'm someone who tends to go off and clean if I hit writer's block or get frustrated on an assignment, or just get bored doing something, and that can sometimes be a problem. But, for me, being in my office on campus is even more distracting—lots of noises, lots of people popping in and out, the temptation to socialize with my colleagues. I like the quiet. So, overall, I'd say that my reading and writing environment at home helps me to do my job.

*****Writing Exercise #1:** Choose to write about one of the questions below. You may also answer both of them in your response. Your essay should be a paragraph or two (200–300 words). This can be more of an informal essay, as mine is above, but you should demonstrate your command of English prose and follow standard grammatical and mechanical conventions. **If your essay has more than one grammatical or mechanical error, you must revise and resubmit for a grade.**

1. What is your current reading and writing environment like? Describe the room, the possible distractions, and even your habits as you start to write. If you have a couple different work environments, you can discuss up to two of those. Choose the ones you use the most.
2. How does your university reading/writing environment differ or resemble the one you had in high school? Did you read/write in class a lot in high school? If so, did you prefer it to home? Why or why not?



3. Literary Imagery and Close Reading

Imagine that you had been desperately looking for a place to have a cheap-but-classy first date, and you finally decided on the Montgomery Museum of Fine Arts. (Nice move!) And imagine, while there and momentarily separated from your date, you passed some time by looking at the paintings and sculptures. If I didn't know you but watched you looking at the art for several minutes, I bet that I could tell that you were there for the date and not for the art. Do you know how I could make that guess?



Someone looking at Elmer Borlongan's *The Circle Game*

My guess would have nothing to do with your age or appearance, and everything to do with how long you spent looking at one painting or one sculpture. Because this is often what separates the experienced art watchers from the inexperienced. Inexperienced visitors tend to try to look at as much stuff as they can. Experienced visitors often tend to graze around for a while until they find something they like also, but then they do something different, spending a significant time looking at only one artifact. They look closely, intensely, losing themselves in the work of art for a few minutes. They connect with something personally, emotionally, physically—everything else fades away for a few moments.

I'd like to spend a minute explaining why that is, for that will also help me explain what literary imagery and close reading are, and how you should approach reading a poem, which many people find as daunting as looking at a painting intently for ten minutes. My definition of art is something crafted to reward extended attention, whether that something is music, a poem, a painting, or anything else. Some objects are made for the short-term, for one-time, momentary use, and there's nothing wrong with that. But other objects take longer to craft, significantly longer, and they are designed to reward those who spend time on them—like if you chose to re-read that famous novel you didn't like the first time in high school, or if you spent ten minutes in front of one painting, really looking. Art shifts under our insistent gaze. Art changes. Art reveals its meanings gradually and grudgingly.

And something funny happens once you start giving art your time, trying to understand how it was crafted and why that way. You start thinking differently about the objects you craft, the writing that you do for instance, and the effects you're trying to produce. That's one good reason why you are learning to analyze literature as part of your college education. English professors call this focusing skill "close reading," and it's one of the key skills I want you to develop in this class because it has long-term benefits for your education: for how you see, how you read, and how you write.

I'm starting with this example of visual art because I think it's a good way to think about **literary imagery**. The way we interpret imagery in a painting is quite similar to how we interpret imagery in a poem or novel. For instance, when you look at a painting—say, Turner's *Norham Castle, Sunrise* (see the next page)—there are specific visual elements that may draw your attention. At first, you may see a lot of blurry colors and indistinct shapes. What's going on here? Where's the castle? Where's the sunrise? The painting is imagistic and obscure, but the longer you look, you see the shape of a castle in the middle of the painting, and you see what appears to be a yellow sun just above it. And when you look even longer, the more you understand that this must be an intentional choice: Turner is painting *sunlight*, not a detailed castle, and sunlight is difficult to capture—it's always shifting, always changing. Can someone even paint light? Light blends and folds into the atmosphere, it reflects off things, it's everywhere and nowhere at once. So, you begin to understand that this is a painting of *atmosphere*, of *mood*.

When I look at the painting, my gaze eventually focuses on the animal in the foreground: is it a cow? a dog? a horse? Is it drinking from a river? Is that why we see reflections everywhere in the foreground? (The River Tweed does in fact run right in front of Norham Castle.) The animal's reflection doubles itself, which then makes me think of larger, more abstract questions, like: What is existence? What does it mean to be here or there, right now or a while ago? How do we perceive the world? Is it only through our sensory perceptions, or do emotion and mood and spirituality play important roles? How do we remember what we see? How does memory shape our ideas and perceptions of the world? This is what good art does—it challenges us, questions our beliefs, suggests ideas, offers images, potentialities. **I call this process "Notice and Focus":** what are all of the details you notice about a work of art (make a list), and then what are the major details you focus on and why?

Literature does this, too, but it does so through language. **Literary imagery refers to descriptive and figurative language:** literary authors create mental and emotional "pictures," which are no less real and impactful than the visual images in a painting. When you choose to read a poem slowly, it's similar to the process of spending ten minutes looking at one painting: there are questions that you can ask yourself, patterns you can notice, details that reveal themselves—and all of this will open up the imagery for you. And it's a good idea to write your notes down as you read, either in the margin of the text or on a sheet of paper—it may be the case that one observation will make more sense later, when you consider it together with other observations.



J.M.W. Turner, *Norham Castle, Sunrise*

Let's consider some basics about literary imagery. Authors have a whole host of literary elements and devices that they use to appeal to our senses—sight, hearing, touch, taste, smell—as well as internal feelings and emotions, even ideas. Authors use these devices to produce imagery. You probably know some of these devices, like **metaphors**, **similes**, and **analogies**. We use these devices in everyday language all of the time. I'm as hungry as a horse (analogy). I feel like a million bucks (simile). He's the black sheep of the family (metaphor). I've provided you with a document that lists many of the most common literary terms and devices (with many examples)—make sure to read this carefully and use it as a reference throughout the semester. You should become familiar with these devices, and, by the final exam, be able to explain what most of them are and how they work.

These literary devices and sensory details in a poem or story (that is, imagery) are often what make literature, literature—without imagery, what you'd be reading is a factual report. Consider the difference between this factual statement about a tree:

There is an oak tree in my backyard. It is thirty-three feet high and has numerous branches full of leaves.

and this passage from Joyce Kilmer's poem "Trees":

A tree whose hungry mouth is prest
Against the earth's sweet flowing breast;

A tree that looks at God all day,
And lifts her leafy arms to pray.

Do you **notice** a difference? Perhaps you **notice** that Kilmer uses imagery to describe the tree. He describes the trunk as a “hungry mouth” feeding off “the earth’s breast.” He’s using **personification** here—that means she’s attributing personal, human-like qualities to something that’s non-human. This device produces a striking image: the tree is a child, suckling a mother’s (i.e., the earth) breast for nourishment and life. The description is maternal, natural, beautiful, sensual, and deeply human. It makes us think of trees in a completely different manner than the factual statement above. I imagine its roots as living, thinking things that are intentionally delving into the earth for sustenance. The earth is also alive, and Kilmer is playing on the oft-used term Mother Earth, which is also a form of personification. He then continues to develop this imagery, describing the tree’s branches as “arms” lifted up in praise of God. Now, the tree possesses a kind of spirituality, an inner life. Trees are alive, after all, though they move and grow at a much slower pace than humans. But Kilmer’s imagery brings this similarity to the forefront. Trees are alive. They might be praying. They might be thinking.

You may also **notice** the poem has rhythm, like a song—this is called **meter**—and a **rhyme scheme**. In fact, if we want to get a bit technical, this poem is written in iambic tetrameter couplets. That means each line contains four feet (tetra means “four”) made of two syllables each (iambic is the name of the particular poetic foot), alternating between unstressed and stressed syllabus (think of this as beats), and every two lines end on the same rhyme (prest/breast, day/pray). This use of meter and rhyme creates the poem’s musicality, and that musicality stresses certain words, influencing how we read and understand the poem. Part of the pleasure I get from reading poetry comes from its musicality. There’s also a bit of **alliteration** here: “looks,” “lifts,” and “leafy” all begin with the same sound, creating a pattern, further emphasizing the tree’s living nature. (There’s also **consonance** and **assonance**, but I’ll stop here for now!)

Let’s consider another example: former poet laureate Billy Collins’s poem “Introduction to Poetry.” In this poem, Collins imagines himself as a teacher who asks his students to read a poem.

Introduction to Poetry

I ask them to take a poem
and hold it up to the light
like a color slide

or press an ear against its hive.

I say drop a mouse into a poem
and watch him probe his way out,

or walk inside the poem’s room
and feel the walls for a light switch.

I want them to waterski
 across the surface of a poem
 waving at the author's name on the shore.

But all they want to do
 is tie the poem to a chair with rope
 and torture a confession out of it.

They begin beating it with a hose
 to find out what it really means.

Each stanza introduces a new image. First, the poem is “like a color slide” (simile), which suggests that it is something you can only see in all its beauty and intensity when you hold it a certain way and let light pass through. The light here is your own perspective, your mind, your interpretation or feeling for the poem. There is no poem without the reader. Then, the poem is a beehive (metaphor), buzzing with mystery and energy, but also potentially dangerous: What might be inside? What might come bursting forth? And what's the sweet nectar within? What's the honey of the poem? Then, the poem is a maze (metaphor), and more specifically a maze for a mouse, which implies a scientific experiment—you won't get the same result every time, will you? You must try again and again to identify the pattern and come to a conclusion. Then, the poem is a dark room, and the reader is searching for a light switch to illumine its contents—but it's the searching that matters here, getting a bit lost, losing your bearings for a minute or two (analogy). Then, the poem is a body of water, far removed from the author, something to play on, to play with, to enjoy. But, alas, Collins's students treat the poem like a prisoner of war, tortured and beaten for a “confession” of “what it really means.” His students, in other words, have not read the poem properly—they're trying to read it like a factual report rather than a work of literature. And what happens when you “beat” something? It withers, cowers, dies.

The takeaway? Don't beat literature to death (it's a funny poem!). Slow down, take your time, take it all in, observe, think, take notes, find something interesting or intriguing, focus on how you feel, what jumps out at you—enjoy it! “Introduction to Poetry” is a playful poem about how you have to bring a bit of a playful, open-minded perspective to reading poems. And that's a conclusion I've arrived at through **close reading**, which is what I've done in these last two paragraphs.

This week, I want you to learn how to read poems as poems—as works of literature. We're reading a wide selection of love poems from the *Norton Anthology of Poetry*, which has a great introduction on how to read a poem, and that's where I want you to start: read the intro, then read the poems and the authors' various instructions and pointers. Take notes, look up words you don't know, identify various kinds of literary devices—then complete this week's writing exercise.

***Writing Exercise #2:

Select one poem from this week's reading, then write it out, preferably by hand (but a Word document is also fine). Then, practice “Notice and Focus” by annotating each line of the poem in the margin—that means defining words you don't know, identifying and explaining literary devices (like metaphors and similes), and listing the various elements you notice. Once you've annotated each line, write one sentence at the end of the poem in which you explain your overall conclusion/interpretation of the poem based on your annotations. What you're doing is a close reading! To submit, take a picture or upload the document.

*****Writing Exercise #3: Word History**

Choose one word from one assigned William Blake poem and write a mini essay of ~300 words in which you analyze the origins of the word and the way the word is used at one specific point in the poem. You will first need to look up the word in the Oxford English Dictionary (which you can access through the AUM Library databases) and learn about its various meanings and etymology. How did this English word come to be? What are its origins? What did it mean during the eighteenth century? Is this the same meaning as today? How does Blake use the word? So, this is a combination of explaining the meaning of the word and a close reading of the word in the poem. The essay should be three paragraphs: an introductory paragraph that establishes your word and explains why it is important in the poem; a second paragraph that provides the history and meaning of the word from your research into the OED; and a third paragraph that provides a close reading of one spot in the poem where the word appears. If your essay has more than one grammatical/mechanical error, you will need to revise and resubmit for a grade.

4. Genre and Narrative

Perhaps, like me, you have a friend, family member, or significant other who loves to watch Hallmark movies. And perhaps, like me, this drives you somewhat crazy. But this has nothing to do with the mediocre acting, uninspired scores, or total lack of diversity in casting (well, all of that, too). It's because they have predictable plots: I can usually outline the entire story of a Hallmark movie from watching the first five minutes, or even looking at the advertising image for the film. How is this, you ask? Am I a cinematic genius? Do I have magical powers? Alas, no. The reason is that almost every Hallmark movie is a romantic comedy (aka romcom), a **genre** that follows a very specific formula—and Hallmark movies in particular do not deviate or experiment with this formula at all. Check out the film images below. Do you see a pattern? Can you guess what will happen in these movies?



The basic plot structure of a romantic comedy is this: two **protagonists** meet (a protagonist is a main character), and they are clearly meant to be together romantically, but along the way something drives them apart—a misunderstanding, another love interest, social/economic/family tensions. However, these lovers overcome their problems and unite at the end of the movie, living happily ever after. You may be familiar with this genre, even if you didn't know its name: the romcom is one of the most popular film genres. If you haven't seen a Hallmark movie, think of other romcoms, like *Pretty Woman*, *You've Got Mail*, *Brown Sugar*, *Crazy Rich Asians*, or *Lovebirds*. Or, if you're not big into films, maybe you've read a Jane Austen novel—she basically invented the romantic comedy genre.

You may have guessed by now that **genre refers to a specific category of art, a type or kind of literature, music, film, or painting**. Maybe you're really into horror films, or science fiction novels, or Americana music, or landscape paintings. These are all genres. Some genres, like romantic comedies, have a pretty rigid structure, so they're all kind of the same—many people, including my wife, find this comforting and relaxing, as she knows exactly what to expect. Other genres, like science fiction, are more fluid and have a good bit of flexibility. And some artists will fuse multiple genres, creating a work of art that cannot be easily categorized. Do you have a favorite musician or film that defies categorization? Is that part of what you love about that particular artist? I do. For example, the novelist Jeff VanderMeer fuses the genres of science fiction, fantasy, speculative fiction, horror, mythology, and climate fiction, creating a “new” genre he calls the “New Weird.” And yes, his novels are very weird and unexpected—no formula here!

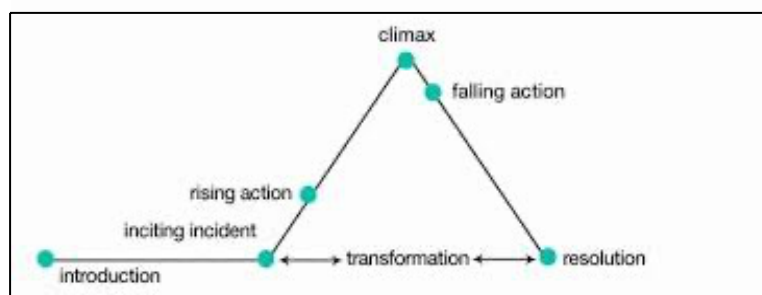
So, genre is a way for readers/viewers to make sense of a work of art. Genres have shared characteristics, and we have expectations for them. If I read a **tragedy**, I know the titular character (the main character whose name gives the work its title) is going to die in the end. That's what happens

in a tragedy. If I read a **comedy**, I know things are going to end on a very happy note—the good guys will get rich or get married (or both). If I read a **romance**, like we’re doing this week, I know I’ll be reading about **the fantastical adventures of a hero who goes on a quest, encounters supernatural beings, and demonstrates chivalric virtues and courtly love** (it’s a common medieval genre). All of these elements and expectations are built into genre.

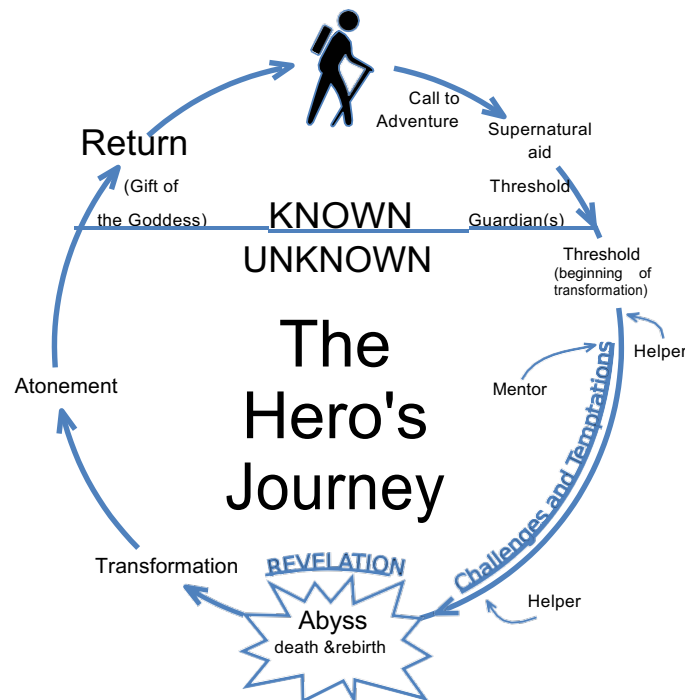
Okay, now that you know what genre is, let’s get a bit more specific. What are the main genres of literature? If you ask Aristotle, who created the original classification system, there are three main genres: **poetry**, **prose**, and **performance**. Think of these as the Three P’s. **Poetry** is a form of literature written in verse, using a wide range of literary devices, rhythm, and rhyme, and often meant to produce multiple symbolic meanings and emotional responses from its creative use of language, rather than a direct presentation of one factual idea. **Prose**, on the other hand, is a form of writing that more-or-less uses “normal” speech and grammar: examples of prose include a biology textbook, a news article, and a novel. The third P, **performance**, refers to drama, or plays (and films and TV shows)—actors perform the work (a written text) for an audience (usually a live audience).

Within these Three P’s, there are endless subgenres, so much so that we often use “genre” and “subgenre” interchangeably (and that’s fine). Take the romantic comedy, for example: in literature, this refers to a particular kind of novel or play, which, in turn, are particular kinds of prose and performance, respectively. Or, consider the love poems we read last week: these are examples of **lyric poetry**. Lyric is a form of non-narrative poetry that expresses and explores emotions, feelings, and/or abstract concepts and ideas (like love!). The name derives from the lyre, a musical instrument used by Ancient Greek poets, who sang their lyric poems (that’s where we get the term “music lyrics” today). In contrast to lyric poetry, **epics** are narrative poems that tell a story—this means there are **characters**, a **setting**, a **plot**, and a **narrator**. *Beowulf* is an epic poem—you may have read that in high school. Other major poetic genres include odes, elegies, psalms, and satires. We’re only reading a handful of different genres for this class, but it’s good to know that there are many, many genres out there, and knowing the genre of a work of art is essential to understanding and enjoying that work of art, whether you’re reading a book, watching a film, looking at a painting, or reading an article online.

For now, I want to think a bit more about narrative, because most of the poems and plays we’re reading for this class are narrative works of literature. **A narrative is a story**. The person telling the story is the **narrator**, who explains a series of events in succeeding order, hopefully in an entertaining manner. This is called the **plot**: what happens, where does it happen (that’s the **setting**), and in what order. The basic plot structure of any story includes an introduction, rising action, the climax, falling action, and a conclusion. The chart below provides a visual of plot.



Does this chart look familiar? It should, because many stories follow an archetypal narrative structure called The Hero's Journey. The Hero's Journey is a specific kind of narrative structure, arguably the most common structure in the world.



There are two major kinds of narrators: the **omniscient narrator**, an “all-knowing,” third-person narrator who knows everything about the characters and events of the story; and the **character narrator**, a first-person narrator who is also a character in the story, and whose knowledge is thus limited to their own perspective. There are several other kinds of narrators, but these are the only two you’ll need to know for this class.

***Writing Exercise #4:

As you read *Lanval* this week, I want you to take lots of notes, both in the text and on a separate sheet of paper. Your writing exercise will be this separate sheet of paper that you submit. First, create a list answering these questions: Who is the narrator? What kind of narrator are they? How does the poem start? What is the setting of the story? Who are the main characters? What kinds of characters are they? How do they interact with one another?

As you read, underline (or mark in some way—sticky tabs, notes, highlighting, etc.) important passages and write down questions about specific parts of the reading. List these questions in your writing exercise. When you've finished reading, return to those passages and questions: go through the steps of close reading on the underlined passages, and then see if you can now answer the questions you wrote down. If you can, write your answers in the writing exercise. If not, bring up these questions in our discussions, or email me.

5. What a Sentence Is

Let's start with a challenge. I challenge you to write a one-word sentence. Write it on a blank sheet of paper, and then write a two-word sentence below it. Follow that with a three-word sentence, then a five-word sentence. That's a total of four sentences—hopefully.

I like this challenge because it encourages you to think about the basics of English writing. What is a sentence? What can we leave out and still write a sentence? What must remain? If you really know the answers to these questions, then you're going to avoid a lot of the major grammatical errors—let's call them problems with sentence boundaries—that plague many university writers. And those are the kinds of errors that will haunt you as you go from class to class, lowering your grades considerably until you can fix the problem.

Before I discuss the sentences you've written, let me give you the basic rule, which you really should memorize to save yourself grief later. **A sentence is defined as a grammatical subject with a verb that expresses a complete thought.** If you are missing even one of those three elements (subject, verb, complete thought), you are writing a sentence fragment.

Let's start with the one-word sentence that you wrote down. Some students write a greeting, like "Hello" or "Good-bye." Those are fine. Some students write words like "You" (which is a pronoun) or "Running" (which is a verb without a subject) or "Smart" (which is an adjective). Those are not fine—they are not sentences. When I do this challenge in class, a few students correctly write one-word sentences that are commands—they use the imperative tense. For example, "Run!" "Think!" "Sleep!" "Listen!"—these are all complete sentences. In fact, compared to the greetings, which are exhausted quite quickly, you can write many more one-word sentences that are commands. The formula is simple. Find a verb that can be used as a command to some unnamed person, and then put an exclamation mark after it.

What these one-word commands suggest is the foundational importance of The Verb. Compared to all the other parts of speech, like subjects, nouns, adjectives, adverbs, prepositions, and so on, the verb stands as the most important. In fact, you will become a better writer quite quickly by consistently noticing where your verbs are and whether you are using the most accurate verb to express your meaning. Much bad writing, which is not necessarily ungrammatical, just bad, is the result of poorly-chosen verbs. But since you've been paying careful attention, you're probably asking yourself, "Why do one-word commands count as sentences?" Don't they lack a grammatical subject, which is defined as a person, place or thing (a noun) doing the main action? The answer is that commands work as one-word sentences because the grammatical subject is assumed. When I write "Run!" I am really writing "(You) run!" In this way, commands are special because they have the grammatical subject, but that subject is hidden.

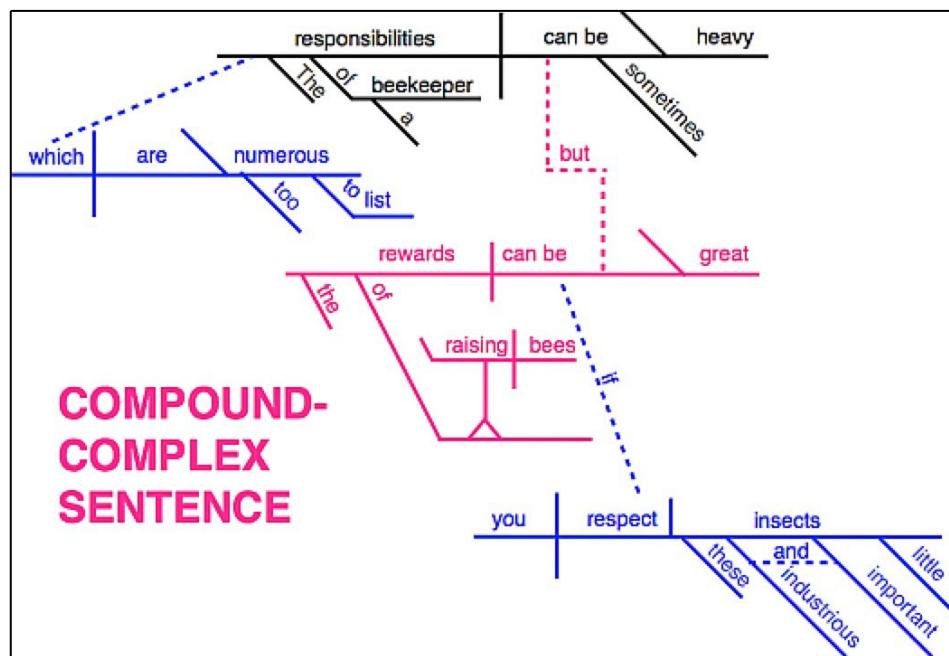
Your two-word, three-word, and five-word sentences should clear up any confusion about the essentials of a sentence. Hopefully, all of these sentences have a grammatical subject and a verb. "I think," "Teachers stink," and "I am" are all sentences. All of these sentences have a grammatical subject doing some action. (In the final sentence, the verb "am" counts as an action—the action of being.) What readers do when they seek to comprehend a sentence is the same thing we do with stories: we try to figure out who (or what) is doing which action. All of the other parts of speech provide additional information, but they are relatively minor characters. In a five word sentence like,

“I ran in the rain,” the most important information is “I ran.” “In the rain” just provides additional information that is not necessary to the sentence being a sentence. The spotlight is on the subject and verb—and especially the verb.

Understanding the power of The Verb is key to good basic and advanced writing. At a basic level, once you can identify the subject and verb in each sentence, you’re 2/3 of the way toward writing complete sentences every time. (I’ll say more about the “complete thought” part in the next essay.) At an advanced level, you can improve your writing by understanding that readers are trying to figure out the action in the sentence, the verb, and revising accordingly. This means that you want to choose strong verbs that actually express the action in the sentence.

It also means that you want to put the verb quite early in most of your sentences. **Your subject and verb should appear in the first six words of most of your sentences.** That seems arbitrary, I know, but this basic advice is excellent: don’t write too many long introductory clauses is another way of putting it. Otherwise, your reader has to work harder, first wading through additional information before they reach the subject and verb, then doing a sort of mental jujitsu by putting the subject and verb before the additional information in their minds. It’s like reading a story for several chapters before realizing that the real hero in the story is actually the character mentioned only in passing in chapter two! You can understand the story regardless, but you probably missed some key information about the hero because you were given false signals by the author that the character was unimportant. It works that way with sentences, too. “Clarity” is partly about how much work your reader has to do to make sense of your sentences. Take it easy on us!

Okay, now you know what a sentence is—read the next chapter to find out what a sentence is not.



Did you learn how to diagram sentences in grade school or in a foreign language course here at AUM?

6. What a Sentence is Not

Wikipedia tells me that one of the most famous phrases in the history of the Supreme Court was written by Justice Potter Stewart. Trying to explain his criteria for “obscenity,” Potter famously said, “I know it when I see it.” I always think of this phrase when I think of how most folks identify sentence fragments. When you graduate and seek a job, the person reading the cover letter for your job application may not—and probably will not—remember how to precisely define or label a sentence fragment. But, trust me, they know a sentence fragment when they see it. They will know something’s seriously wrong there (but not quite obscene!), and there’s a good chance they will judge your communication skills accordingly. In general, sentence fragments are an all-too-easy way for someone to peg you as an inexperienced writer and a poor communicator. For. Sure.

This applies doubly in the university context, where your professors may or may not choose to identify specific sentence fragments in your writing directly, but they will immediately notice. For this reason, learning how to avoid and repair sentence fragments is the quickest way to improved grades on your papers. Over this semester, watch out for any comments about sentence fragments on your papers—most of the time, I’ll simply highlight a sentence and write “fragment.” Ideally, you will banish them from existence—until later in your writing development, when, as I explain later, you may re-introduce them as a deliberate tactic.

You recall from “What a Sentence Is” that a complete sentence needs a grammatical subject, a verb, and it needs to express a complete thought. A sentence fragment is the opposite of a complete sentence. A fragment is a bunch of words posing as a complete sentence (with capitalization and end punctuation), but lacking one of those three required elements. Grammatical subjects are the easiest to identify, and they are very rarely the problem. The definition of a grammatical subject is that it is the main noun (the person, place, or thing) doing the action. There needs to be a verb attached to that subject, which is to say there needs to be an action word. Almost everyone recognizes obvious verbs like “run” “sleep” and “said,” as these are obvious actions. But what about a sentence like “I am.”? (Yes, it is a sentence.) Inexperienced writers sometimes forget that verbs include common words such as “am,” “was,” “were,” and “is.” They are all versions of “to be”—their “action” is being. Similarly, the other most frequently used verb, “to have,” is also a tricky one: “has,” “have,” “have been,” “had”—all these are verbs and need to be recognized as such.

But if you’re struggling with sentence fragments, it’s probably because you’re not applying your knowledge that a sentence needs to express a “complete thought.” This is just a way of saying that your “sentence” can’t rely on another sentence for it to make sense. Here is an example of a perfectly fine sentence: “Despite the weather, I ran to the store.” The definition of a clause is a series of words which end with some form of punctuation, whether it is a comma, period, question mark, semi-colon, parentheses, or what have you. So, there are two clauses in “Despite the weather, I ran to the store.” The second clause, “I ran to the store,” fulfills all the requirements of a sentence, so it’s called an **independent clause**. It doesn’t need anything else to be a sentence. In contrast, “Despite the weather” is a **dependent clause** because it cannot stand as a sentence without another clause. It needs that other clause to be grammatical. So, “Despite the weather, I ran to the store” is a complete sentence that correctly uses a comma to link one dependent clause to one independent clause. But if you just said “Despite the weather,” you’d have a sentence fragment.

Let's push this example just a little further. Let's add something to our example: "Despite the weather, I went to the store. Which was the local Piggly Wiggly's that I visited often." We already know the first sentence is good. What about the second one? It has two nouns, "Piggly Wiggly's" and "I," both of which have potential as a grammatical subject. It even has a verb phrase, "visited often" ("visited" is the verb). But does it express a complete thought? No. The word "which" makes the clause dependent on the previous sentence for its meaning. It is a sentence fragment. As a rough rule of thumb, if you start a sentence with "which" "because" or "since," you're probably going to write a dependent clause.

So, sentence fragments are bad, and you should avoid them at all costs. Right? Well...not exactly. Many advanced writers use sentence fragments consciously and to achieve particular effects. Here are some good sentence fragments written by the Nobel Prize winning novelist, Toni Morrison:

Hagar lowered her eyelids and gazed hungrily down the figure of the woman who had been only a silhouette to her. The woman who slept in the same house with him [Milkman], and who could call him home and we would come, who knew the mystery of his flesh, had memory of him as long as his life. The woman who knew him, had watched his teeth appear, stuck her finger in his mouth to soothe his gums. Cleaned his behind, Vaseline'd his penis, and caught his vomit in a fresh white diaper. (*Song of Solomon*)

Every sentence after the first is a sentence fragment. The second and third sentence have subjects and verbs, but the "who" means that they do not express a complete thought. The fourth sentence goes one step further, and doesn't have any noun at all, just a series of verb phrases. Why does Morrison do that? She uses the sentence fragments here to create a strong rhythm through the repetition of "The woman who." There is an accumulated effect of reference and cadence, and the blatant fragment at the end emphasizes the gritty language and actions of that sentence. Furthermore, the passage represents the thought of a character, and humans don't always think in complete sentences, so Morrison achieves a kind of realism with this method of thought representation.

I use this example to make the following point: Once you have absolutely banished unintentional sentence fragments from your writing, you can invite them back like a crazy but newly-reformed relative visiting for Christmas. Like the relative, they can be a lot of fun...in small doses. Use them to create a jarring effect. Use them for rhythm, like a preacher. They're great for emphasis, especially at the ends of paragraphs. But experiment with them consciously, whatever you do, and think carefully about the precise effects you're trying to achieve.

7. Sentence Variety

You have now learned more about sentence fragments than any university student with a Twitter account and a robust social life should have to endure. It was tough, but we made it through together.

In the middle there, hopefully right before your vision became blurry and you passed out, you may have learned about dependent clauses and independent clauses as well. Remember, a clause is defined as a bunch of words ending with some kind of punctuation. Test your skills: How many clauses are there in the following sentence? “Still, I like to learn, despite it all.”

Did you correctly answer three? The first clause ends with a comma; the second clause ends with the next comma; the third clause ends with the period. Now please bear with me as I offer a few quick reminders. Not all of these clauses have what’s needed to make a sentence, also known as an “independent clause.” To be independent, a clause needs a grammatical subject, a verb, and it must express a complete thought. Otherwise, it is called a dependent clause. If that dependent clause pretends to be a sentence, we punish it by calling it a nasty name—sentence fragment. “Still” is a dependent clause. So is “Despite it all.” Only “I like to learn” is an independent clause. It could be a sentence by itself if it wanted. The other clauses add additional information, but they are not cool enough to really matter in terms of being a sentence. Okay. Now that we’ve learned and re-learned those basics, we can discuss sentence variety. Hurray!

When I talk about your sentence variety, I mean: Do you use only one or two types of sentences for most of your writing? Or do you frequently use all of the four sentence types available? There are only these four types in the English language: simple sentences, compound sentences, complex sentences, and compound-complex sentences. There is a strong correlation between sentence variety, on one hand, and your perceived and actual skills as a writer, on the other hand. When we first learn to write, we use **simple sentences**. They are simple to create and recognize because there is only one clause in the sentence—an independent clause. One example is “I ran.” Another example is “I ran to the store and bought some delicious food for my friend Marco.” These examples show that there is no relationship between the length of a sentence and the kind of sentence it is. Simple sentences can be short or long—if they have only one clause, they are simple.

It is possible to stay stuck writing only simple sentences or mostly simple sentences. One problem with this is that it is much more difficult to communicate the relationships among your ideas if you don’t start combining sentences. It is also inefficient to write only in simple sentences—you can often combine ideas, using fewer words but saying the same thing. Note, too, that writing only in simple sentences is an obvious tell—you might as well wave a flag to your reader and declare aloud that you are still an inexperienced writer. So, let’s talk about other sentence types.

The **compound sentence** is by definition two independent clauses connected with enough grammatical glue. It is a “compound” in the sense that there are two elements (in this case, two clauses) of equal value. What I mean by “enough grammatical glue” is that you can’t just combine a couple of independent clauses (=two sentences) together in any ol’ way. That would result in a kind of error called a run-on sentence, on which more elsewhere. For now, let’s just focus on creating compound sentences like this one: “I like to sit at my desk and write compound sentences, but I fear my poor reader doesn’t like to read them.” Here we have two different independent clauses joined together with a comma plus “but.” Both the comma and the “but” (or a word like it) are that “grammatical

glue.” If you just have a comma or just have a “but,” we’re back in that bad place, Run-On Land. We need both the comma and the “but”—and in that order.

There are also other words, other coordinating conjunctions, which you could use after a comma to create a compound sentence. Maybe you vaguely recalling coming across the FANBOYS acronym at some point in your education? It reminds us of the only words we can use after a comma to connect two sentences. They are “**F**or” “**A**nd” “**N**or” “**B**ut” “**O**r” “**Y**et” “**S**o”—**FANBOYS**. Many writers who use compound sentences rely way too heavily—or exclusively!—on “and” as well as “but.” True, you definitely will use them more than the others, since they are basic signals of the relations between two independent clauses. When you use “and,” it’s like a plus sign—you’re just adding another idea to the first. When you use “but” it’s kind of like a minus sign or a signal to reverse. You’re signaling that your second clause will taking you in a different direction. But the other FANBOYS suggest other useful logical relationships between two clauses. Experiment with them in your first paper.

The third major type of sentence is a **complex sentence**. The definition of a complex sentence is that you combine at least one dependent clause with an independent clause, using only a comma to do so. It is “complex” because the relationship between the two parts is **not** an equal one (unlike the relationship between clauses in a compound sentence). The independent part is more important than the dependent part, so the purpose of the comma is to separate essential information from mere additional details for your reader. An example of a compound sentence is, “Still, I think that you’re great.” The “still” is dependent; the “I think” clause is independent. Because there is only one sentence here, I do not need the coordinating conjunction. The comma is enough glue for a complex sentence. One convenient aspect of the English language is that it is modular, meaning that you can often move stuff around. For example, you could write, “Still, I think you’re great.” “I think, still, that you’re great.” “I think that you’re great, still.” See how the “still” is not still? All of these complex sentences are equally grammatical, but the meaning of the sentence changes subtly depending on where you put the “still.” Skillful writers are more conscious that such possibilities exist, and they choose the one version that best fits their intended meaning.

Once you have the simple, compound, and complex sentences down, you pretty much know all the major sentence types. Don’t sweat the fourth and final sentence type, the **compound-complex** sentence, since it is just a combination of a compound and complex sentences. As you might guess, that means it’s a compound sentence with at least one dependent clause added to it. Here’s an example: “I went to the store, and I bought some bread, which was delicious.” And because English is modular, I needn’t put the dependent clause anywhere in particular. This is another compound-complex sentence: “However, I like to read, so I will continue doing so.” In this instance, the dependent clause is first, then an independent clause, then a comma + so, then another independent clause.

Okay, now that you know so much about sentences, I don’t want to see any fragments in your remaining assignments! And I want to see a good variety of sentence types in that final paper.

8. Topic Sentences

The first sentence of each body paragraph is known as the topic sentence. That means that your first paragraph (the introduction) and your last paragraph (the conclusion, if you have one) do not have topic sentences because they are not body paragraphs, but every other paragraph in your essay does.

That first sentence of each body paragraph is a privileged place in an academic essay, usually secondary in importance only to the thesis, which is located in the last sentence of the introductory paragraph. By privileged, I mean that by convention and experience, skilled writers and their readers pay more attention to that sentence. If you're not giving topic sentences special attention now, you're missing rich opportunities to write well or read well. They announce the primary argument motivating every other sentence in that body paragraph. Like your thesis, they represent an implicit promise to your reader. They say, "This is an argument related to the thesis that I'm going to develop, provide evidence for, and improve over the course of the next, say, six to ten sentences. When I stop discussing matters related to this argument, I will start a new paragraph, which will feature a new topic sentence."

Topic sentences matter, in other words, because they provide a writer's best opportunity to orient the reader, to signal organization at the local-level of the paragraph, rather than the global-level of the entire paper. I think of them as road signs that tell my reader what lies ahead. Your thesis can only do so much of this kind of work. In a short essay, that thesis might be able to *generally* describe the main argument in each body paragraph. (Though there are limits even to this, as I discuss below.) In a longer essay, anything longer than five or six paragraphs, your thesis actually does less organizational work and even more pressure is put on your topic sentences. If you're writing a ten-page paper, for example, how can you announce the different ideas in all your paragraphs with just a thesis? Short answer: You cannot. Sure, you can use your thesis to sketch out what the entire house of your argument will look like, but the eventual content and dimension of the individual rooms can't fit in a sketch; they need their own descriptions.

While topic sentences provide crucial clarity for your reader, composing them can confuse writers who are inexperienced at significantly revising their first drafts. That's because, almost always, you will need to write at least **two** versions of each topic sentence for it to do its dual jobs. When you start drafting the paragraph, you need something to get you started, to give you guidance for the paragraph you plan to write. Writing the first version of your topic sentence should help you decide what to include or exclude in that paragraph. Early versions of your topic sentences combine with your working thesis to answer questions like, "How will my overall argument progress? What will be the major pieces of that argument?"

Take some time now to look at the topic sentences in your final paper, when we get there: you may need to revise your topic sentences at least once for your reader, after you finish drafting the paragraph and after you draft the entire paper. As you revise, remember that your topic sentences shouldn't just repeat part of your thesis, even in a short paper. Instead, they should offer a more specific version of that part of your thesis, meaning a version that has greater nuance or detail. Think of it like this. Your thesis, which is only one sentence with several clauses, can only offer so much information about your plan for each paragraph while remaining clear. Your topic sentence is a crucial opportunity to make that first version of your idea more specific yet. It is a very common problem to have a paragraph that starts out way too slow because it is too generalized or it doesn't even offer a specific argument coming from the author (as opposed to a source's argument).

Beginning writers fret that they'll leave their ideas for the paragraph in the first sentence, the topic sentence, if they're too specific. Nothing could be further from the truth. Specificity gives your paragraph direction, so start with the greatest degree of specificity and then get more specific yet.

As you gain even greater experience with topic sentences, you may find that my definition of a topic sentence as only the first sentence of each body paragraph is too constricting. An excellent book that has influenced my own writing, Joseph Williams's *Style: Towards Clarity and Grace*, makes this very argument. It argues that the first two sentences work together to offer your argument for the body paragraph. In truth, there is much accuracy to this claim: when I review my own body paragraphs for this essay, I find that often the first two sentences of each body paragraph work in harmony. But often when you write short academic essays of four or five paragraphs, you only have that first sentence to get to the point. And, regardless of how well they work together, the first sentence has a privileged position that the second does not as a result of the primacy effect, a principle of psychology which states we have a better chance of remembering things in the first position. For instance, I bet you remember your first kiss better than your second. I bet you remember the first time you were really sick more than the second. Writing works like that too—there are several famous first sentences in literature, but significantly fewer famous second sentences.

Depending on what they're reading, some weak readers skim documents by only reading the first part of every paragraph. And this tactic is also taught to people who want to learn how to "speed read." In other words, topic sentences get the attention of both novice and expert readers, for different reasons. That's an index of how important the topic sentence should be to you. Make it count!

9. Conclusion

Wow, you made it to the end—of this textbook, that is! Thank you for the time you spent reading and thinking about these pages and for your work in the course, more generally.

So, what's left? Well, there are still **nine** weeks left in the semester! We'll be reinforcing the skills you've learned so far: close reading, literary analysis, and clear writing. You've made it this far, so I know you have the drive and persistence to finish the course on a strong note—and then to take what you've learned on to other classes here at AUM, and, perhaps more importantly, to develop even more as a reader, writer, and thinker, as a valuable member of the human race—as a contributor to culture and knowledge.



