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# Literature and Literary Research

Researching literary works and/or biographical information on a particular author

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## What's a good topic?

Choosing a topic can be one of the hardest parts of writing a paper. There are so many possible things to write about, and even if you have a general idea, it can be hard to know whether your topic is a good one.

Writing a literature paper is different from writing many other kinds of papers. In literary analysis, it's not the ideas of other people that matter as much as your own interpretation of the texts you're reading. The bulk of your paper will be made up of your analysis of the text: the use of language, imagery, rhythm and repetition, word choice, the structure of the plot, or the representations of characters, emotions, events, or places. Your job is to analyze these elements of the text and through your analysis to assert an idea, or a claim, about the text, the author, or the context in which the text was written.

So what makes a good topic? A good topic is a theme that you think is represented in the text you're reading. But how do you get from a good topic to a good research question?

## What's a good research question?

Once you recognize a theme in a text or texts, your next step is to determine what you think the texts are saying about that theme. Read the text again, paying particular attention to your theme. What does your interpretation lead you think about the theme or idea? This is your claim, and your paper is structured around using analysis of the text or texts to support your claim.

For example, you may be interested in looking at community or society in Thoreau's "Walden." You may have read the text and noticed a contradiction between Thoreau's claims of self-reliance and his interaction with society. You would then re-read the text, asking yourself as you read "What is the representation of society and Thoreau's relationship to it in 'Walden'?" After reading the text closely and paying special attention to these aspects of "Walden," you may be ready to make the claim that while Thoreau believed he was self-reliant, in truth he was still part of a network of people, and still part of his society and community. Or you may discover that your initial thought was wrong, and that Thoreau really did separate himself from his community in the way he wrote about.

## So how do I use sources?

In order to make your argument even stronger, you may want to find out more about Thoreau's role in his community by reading primary source material (letters that he wrote to friends and colleagues, newspaper articles about him or about his community) or by reading more about the context of his life in Massachusetts (the political and artistic movements of which he was part, the actual location of his cabin in relation to the town of Concord). These additional sources are used to support your interpretation, not necessarily to be the bulk of your evidence. Your evidence should primarily lie in your interpretation of the text itself.

## Types of Sources

There are a lot of different kinds of sources that you can use in your analysis. This guide will show you how to find and use these by type.

**Primary Sources** are first-hand accounts. The texts you are reading are a primary source; they are the most important primary source you're working with. Other examples are newspaper and magazine articles, diaries and letters, photographs, maps, and reviews written or created at the same time as your text. These sources can help you put your text into context.

**Reference Sources** give you a broad overview of a person, place, event, or idea. They provide commonly known facts. Reference sources are not cited in your paper, but can be very useful for grounding you in your subject and ensuring that you have solid background information. **Literary biographies**are a form of reference material, and give you lots of information about authors, with an emphasis on how their lives are related to their writing.

**Secondary Sources** are also sometimes referred to as **criticism.** These are books and articles that scholars have written about a particular work of literature, movement, or author. Criticism can help you get a sense of the themes that other scholars read in a particular text. They may help inform your own understanding of a text, either because they reinforce your interpretation, or differ from it. Criticism is usually published in books or as articles in scholarly journals.

<http://www.drnarendrabhatt.in/images/pdf/academic-presentations/Literature%20Research.pdf>

<https://www.academia.edu/19922529/The_Nature_and_Scope_of_Literary_Research>

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# Literary Studies, what is that?

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Literary Studies, what is that?

Many of my students in English department who are taking the subject of Introduction to Literature are confused on how to define the word ‘literature’. Basically, there is hundreds of definition of this word depending on the aspect of where the definition is viewed. “There have been various attempts to define literature. You can define it, for example, as ‘imaginative’ writing in the sense of fiction – writing which is not literally true” ([Eagleton](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Terry_Eagleton) 1). It means that the meaning of the word literature is not as strict as people assume these days. However, as Eagleton points out, “perhaps literature is definable not according to whether it is fictional or ‘imaginative’, but because it uses language in peculiar ways” (2). In this point of view, literature is then viewed through the use of the language. If the language used in the text is closer to the ‘peculiar ways’ then probably the text can be categorized as literature. Indeed, “literature transforms and intensifies ordinary language, deviates systematically from everyday speech” (Eagleton 2). This has clearly emphasized that the way the language used is the basic aspect of what scholars use in deciding texts as literature.

“Literature is broadly defined as any written or spoken material, but the term most often refers to creative works. Literature includes poetry, drama, fiction, and many kinds of nonfiction writing, as well as oral, dramatic, and broadcast compositions not necessarily preserved in a written format, such as films and television programs” (Milne lv). Milnes has made the definition of literature becomes expanded. It is not only dealing with texts but also other types of texts as mentioned above.

Historically, literature has been studied and read since c-750 BC until 2007. This is the period where literature has grown and developed much over the years. As Milne describes, in c-750 BC, Homer was the author representative of classicism and his works were flourishes at this time, then, until 2007, there was Kurt Vonegut Jr., as the author representative of Postmodernism and Science Fiction and Fantasy Literature (xvii-xxxii). In literary studies, the students will learn how to recognize this development and critical advancement of literary works in the era of the works produced. There are thousands of authors who have produced their work in different era from c-750 BC until 2007. It shows that as a field of study, literary studies is a big and huge field of study to learn, especially for students who are not from English speaking country.

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When the students learn literary studies, they will learn mainly five crucial things in their studies. They are literary works as the texts studied, literary theories, literary criticism, the author, and the readers.

[**Literary**](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Literature) **works as the texts studied**

Klarer mentions that fiction, poetry, drama, and film are genres studied in textual studies, or literary studies (9). “The literary work was neither a vehicle for ideas, a reflection of social reality nor the incarnation of some transcendental truth; it was a material fact, whose functioning could be analyzed rather as one could examine a machine” (Eagleton 2-3). The notion of viewing literary works would best be described as the way the readers think of the ‘machine’ as Eagleton and Klarer said. However, this perspective seems to make literary works have their components in which each of the components can be analyzed further through systematical methodology within the literary studies.

**Literary theories**

There are five theoretical approaches to literatures. They are text-oriented approaches, author-oriented approaches, reader-oriented approaches, context-oriented approaches, and literary critique or evaluation (Klarer 73). In a simple point of view, text-oriented approaches are ways in analyzing the works by looking solely at the works. It means that external factors are not considered in analyzing literary works in this approach. Meanwhile, author-oriented means looking at how works are related to the authors. The author’s influences toward his or her works are also studied in this approach. In the reader-oriented approach, the focus is analyzing the connection between the works and the readers. How well or how influential the works with the readers are also studied in this approach. In the context-oriented approaches, the literary works are studied by focusing on certain fields, such as psychology, sociology, and culture. The relationship between the works and these fields is also studied. The last form is literary critique or evaluation. It means conducting scholarly analysis towards the literary works by functioning the acceptable methodology and system applied in the research on literature.

**Literary criticism**

The meaning of criticism, based on Cambridge Advanced Learner’s Dictionary, is basically defined as “the formal study and discussions of works of literature, which involves judging and explaining their importance and meaning” (Walter). Meanwhile, the word ‘literary’, as an adjective, means “related to literature” (Walter). Therefore, the words ‘literary criticism’, in its epistemology can be defined as the action of judging and explaining the importance and meaning of the works that are considered as literature. This kind of activity is common in literary studies. There will be concept of literary theories that are applied to the process of understanding literary works in this kind of criticism. Certain methodology and current method are also applied in the action of literary criticism.

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**The Authors**

Studying the author in literary studies mean studying the movement in literature. Several authors ‘move’ their works based on several movements. Below is some movements in literature (Milne xxxv). If you are interested on this topic, you may begin searching about this by clicking the following topics on literary movement.

Absurdism, Beat Movement, Bildungsroman, Classicism, Colonialism, Elizabethan Drama, Enlightenment, Existentialism, Expressionism, Gothic literature, Greek Drama, Harlem Renaissance, Humanism, Imagism, Magic Realism, Medieval Mystics, Modernism, Naturalism, Neoclassicism, Post-colonialism, [Post-modernism](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Postmodernism), Realism, [Renaissance literature](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Renaissance_literature), Romanticism, Science Fiction and Fantasy Literature, Surrealism, Symbolism, Transcendentalism, Smaller Movements and Schools.

To my mind, based on what I have studied so far about literary authors, I divided authors into two categories. Those are in the past and those are at present. There will be authors for the future. Authors who had actively produced their works in the past are known as authors of the classics, such as Shakespeare, [Edgar Allan Poe](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Edgar_Allan_Poe), Jane Austin, and many more. Meanwhile, authors who are categorized at present times are those whose works are still being read and the authors are still alive. The difference between these two categories of authors is merely on how they shape their works based on the situation that is happening in the society.

**The Readers**

In literary studies, the readers are not actually the things studied as like the students studied the literary works. The readers are studied by the students in relation to how the readers perceive certain kinds of literary works. Therefore, the purpose of analyzing the readers is not in the way to understand the readers but in the way the literary works give significant influences to the readers. This aspect is also categorized into the reader-oriented approaches in literary criticism.

Selected readings about Introduction to Literary Studies (Bennet 297):

* Barry, Peter. Beginning Theory: An Introduction to Literary Theory and Cultural Studies. 2nd ed. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002.
* Culler, Jonathan. Literary Theory: A Very Short Introduction. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997.
* Eagleton, Terry. Literary Theory: An Introduction. 2nd ed. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1996.
* Selden, Raman, Peter Widdowson and Peter Brooker, eds. A Reader’s Guide to Contemporary Literary Theory. 4th ed. Hemel Hempstead: Prentice Hall, 1997.

Selected readings in the form of references on literature (Bennet 297):

* Coyle, Martin, Peter Garside, Malcolm Kelsall and John Peck, eds. Encyclopedia of Literature and Criticism. London and New York: Routdlege, 1990.
* Cuddon, J.A, ed. The Penguin Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1992.
* Gray, Martin. A Dictionary of Literary Terms. 2nd ed. Harlon, Essex and Beirut: Longman York Press, 1992.
* Groden, Michael and Martin Kreiswirth, eds. The Johns Hopkins Guide to Literary Theory and Criticism. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994.
* Makaryk, Irena R, ed. Encyclopedia of Contemporary Literary Theory: Approaches, Scholars, Terms. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1993.
* Sim, Stuart. The A-Z Guide to Modern Literary and Cultural Theorists. Hemel Hepstead: Prentice Hall/Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1995
* Wolfreys, Julian, ed. The Edinburgh Encyclopedia of Modern Criticism and Theory. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2002.

The writer encourages the readers to read this book for another reading on literature:

Schmitz, Thomas A. Modern Literary Theory and Ancient Texts: An Introduction. Massachussets: Blackwell Publishing, 2007.

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Bennet, Andrew and Nicholas Royle. An Introduction to Literature, Criticism, and Theory. 3rd ed. London: Pearson, Longman, 2004.

Eagleton, Terry. Literary Theory: An Introduction. Anniversary Edition. Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press, 2008.

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