

WRITING ABOUT LITERATURE: SUPPORTING AN ARGUMENT

ARGUMENT AND THESIS

Like any assignment, you should shape an **argument** as you discuss the story you've chosen. Your argument should take the shape of a **thesis** that contends something about the effect of one or more techniques of fiction.

Argument in Hemingway example:

Hemingway creates a feeling of restlessness and inertia by restricting the narration.

Possible thesis statement:

In "Hills Like White Elephants," Hemingway exposes the dark side of relationships—particularly their restlessness and inertia—by carefully restricting the action, dialogue, and narrative flow.

SUPPORTING THE THESIS

All arguments must be supported with evidence; traditionally we speak of three kinds of support: logical, emotional, and ethical. When writing argumentative essays on literature, we are all often tempted to give our own reaction to what we've read, but this kind of *emotional* support is not necessarily convincing evidence for an argument about a text. Along the same lines, we often want to relate literature to our own lives—a kind of *ethical* support—but again this is not the best evidence to persuade your readers to believe an argument about literature.

Logical support—in the case of literature, evidence drawn from quotations and other objective sources—is the best evidence for an argument about a piece of literature, even if that argument itself is your subjective aesthetic take on the text. **You must be able to both provide evidence from the text (quotations and paraphrases) to support your argument, and you must be able to explain the way in which the quoted or paraphrased passages act as support. Remember: quotations don't "show" anything; you must show why/how the quotations logically support your argument. Merely rephrasing the quotation does not show that you understand its significance to your argument.**

Examples:

POOR: At one point, the male character says, "It's really an awfully simple operation, Jig" (1495). This shows that terse dialogue creates a dark view of relationships.

POOR: At one point, the male character says, "It's really an awfully simple operation, Jig" (1495). Here he is telling the woman that the abortion is just a "simple operation."

BETTER: At one point, the male character says, "It's really an awfully simple operation, Jig" (1495). This terse line of dialogue may be the most unsettling line in the entire story as the male speaker reduces the trauma of the proposed abortion to a "simple operation."

