

Sample Interpretive Essay

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Essay #1

Civilizations of the Ancient World

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Students are often called upon to write interpretive essays about the topics they're studying in class. What's the best approach for creating a constructive and comprehensive interpretive essay? Some say that only describing the evidence is what's important, while others say that expressing opinions is the answer. I believe that making a strong argument supported by three solid examples, in each case describing and then interpreting specific and concrete evidence from primary and secondary sources, is the most effective path to producing a convincing and useful interpretive essay.

problem or question

thesis statement

Providing a strongly-stated argument as a part of your introduction is critical to a good essay. This argument takes the form of a "thesis statement," which can be defined as a clear statement of opinion that someone could disagree with, in answer to a question or problem you have posed. Finishing your introductory paragraph with a strong thesis statement shows the reader that you are not just listing information but making an argument, drawing the reader into both your discussion of the topic and your perspective on it. An arguable thesis "gives the paper purpose" and draws them in.¹

first section: start with an assertion

Establishing first your problem or question, then your thesis as an answer to it, at the start of your essay has a long tradition in historiography, the study of how people write about history. For example, the Roman historian Livy, embarking on a new history of the Roman Republic just as it transitioned to imperial rule in the late first century BCE, began by asking whether such a study was useful or worth the immense labor he would expend on it.² This was his problem or question: why write this history? He then asserted his belief that wealth had corrupted the Romans, and the example of their upright, austere ancestors, contrasted with the society of his own time, would show it.

provide an example from your sources as evidence

all evidence must be cited with a footnote or parenthetical cite

¹ Guptil 93.

² Livy pref.4.

cites point to one of your bibliography entries and add a location (e.g., a page number or section number)

The subjects to which I would ask each of my readers to devote his earnest attention are these: the life and morals of the community; the men and the qualities by which through domestic policy and foreign war dominion was won and extended. Then as the standard of morality gradually lowers, let him follow the decay of the national character, observing how at first it slowly sinks, then slips downward more and more rapidly, and finally begins to plunge into headlong ruin, until he reaches these days, in which we can bear neither our diseases nor their remedies.³

long direct quotes are shown as block text

In this way, Livy shows that he will be making an argument about the degradation of Roman society, using evidence from each period to show a reduction in the values that the Romans once cherished. Through the subsequent history, Livy consistently uses detailed and comprehensive evidence to support the strong, clear, and specific argument he makes at the outset. Livy's audience is given the understanding, constantly reinforced throughout the work, that the gradual increase in power and lavish prosperity has eroded the principles that forged the Roman identity itself. This thesis provided Livy with a blueprint for the work to follow, making a strong thesis statement very useful to the author as well as the reader.

after describing your evidence, discuss how it shows what you're trying to say

Supporting your thesis statement with three compelling examples or supporting pillars effectively reinforces your overall argument. Giving your audience three powerful reasons to believe something is an extremely effective strategy in convincing others of your point of view. The three-reasons-why format is easy to follow and helps writers organize their points and the evidence that goes with them.⁴ Three reasons also provide a pattern for the reader to recognize, reinforcing the claim you're making.

second section: begin with an assertion

For example, the Greek author Gellius gave three reasons why crimes are punished by the state: to effect correction and reformation of the wrongdoer; to restore the dignity

³ Livy pref.9.

⁴ Guptil 92.

of the victim; and to provide an example as a means of deterrence. He discussed the utility of each in turn, and in particular argued the value of upholding the dignity of the victim, which Plato had ignored in his discourse on the subject.⁵ In this way, Gellius reinforced the need to ensure a response to crime by providing a pattern of three compelling reasons for doing so beneficial to the community.

Primary and secondary sources provide a concrete foundation for your opinions about historical events and cultures. Essentially, you are saying “I believe this, and here is reliable evidence that says you should, too.” The key word in that sentence is “reliable”: in this era of fake news and false statements by politicians, we are more aware than ever of the need for trustworthy evidence that we can use in forming our own opinions.

*third
section*

Primary sources from the time and place you’re trying to study, while necessarily biased and limited by point of view, provide direct testimony of what was considered important about events and cultural norms to those present at the time. Livy, in constructing his seven-century-spanning history of Rome, relied upon earlier sources closer to the time he was writing about, and often cited them, particular as a way of showing there were conflicting accounts and details found only in some sources. For example, his account of the punitive tribute inflicted on king Philip of Macedon compared the details in the accounts of Valerius Antius and Claudius Quadrigarius.⁶ In this way he was able to establish that there was a hefty tribute, but the specific amount was no longer clear from the records. In another place he described the character of king Prusias of Bythina, making use of the earlier historian Polybius’s discussion of the king

⁵ Gellius *Attic Nights* 7.14.

⁶ Livy 33.30.

and his unworthiness for the throne.⁷ Secondary sources provide expert testimony from those who have extensively studied the primary sources; their conclusions can be used to corroborate your assertions, or point out nuances to be explored in the evidence.

A conclusion provides a way of showing that each of your examples has supported your overall thesis. Exploring the importance of the thesis statement, the utility of the three supporting reasons, and the use of evidence in providing a basis for interpretation, makes clear the effectiveness of a strongly structured and supported interpretive essay.

conclusion ties together your assertions and shows how they support your original thesis

⁷ Livy 45.44; cf. Polybius 30.18.

Bibliography

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