

Essay Topic 2: On a Novel's First Chapter

Choose *one* of the opening chapters from the list of novels provided below and write about what the experience of reading it does for a reader.

Your analysis should connect the literary devices in the chapter (style, point of view, imagery, tone, and so on) with the ideas and emotions it conveys to an audience.

Consider how the chapter guides and manipulates a reader's responses. Think about the chapter as a mental roller coaster ride. If you wanted to explain to someone what the experience of a great roller coaster ride was like, you would have to describe in detail the twists, turns, and loops that happen along the way. Do the same for your chosen chapter.

Base your analysis solely on the opening chapter, even if you have read the rest of the novel. You can certainly discuss any expectations that the chapter sets up for the reader, but you should treat the chapter as an independent, self-contained unit (as it is for every first-time reader of the novel as they read it).

It might help to look at a bland prose summary of your chapter (the kind you can find on SparkNotes or Shmoop) and compare it with the chapter itself. Think about what the summary leaves out, or glosses over, or tries to make clearer than the actual text does. Doing that should help you see how a great author's specific nuances of language can turn a mere vehicle for transporting ideas into an amusement park ride for its readers' minds.

Begin your paper with a genuine question about how the chapter works. Make that question the last sentence of your first paragraph. The rest of the essay should answer this question. Present your analysis in a clear and well-organized manner. Each paragraph should deal with a specific element of the chapter, explain how that element works, and present its main point in a clear topic sentence. Draw your conclusions in your final paragraph by briefly summing up the answers to the question posed at the start of your essay.

Read your chosen chapter slowly, carefully, and repeatedly in order to make worthwhile observations on it. The more specific you are, the better your analysis will be. So focus on small things (like an ambiguous word or phrase, a striking image, a peculiar sentence structure, or other small particulars) and offer some interesting and truthful insight into them. Everything you say in your analysis must relate directly to the actual words of the text. Don't get sidetracked; stick with the words.

Make your prose as clear and concise as possible. Don't waste your time (or mine) trying to sound impressive. Write, instead, in a conversational voice: the clear, plainspoken, engaging voice of a person talking about a subject they find interesting. Don't let your essay run longer than what you have to say. One sentence that actually says something is better than a paragraph that doesn't. Make every word count.

In evaluating your essay, I will focus on the intelligence and specificity of your ideas, the precision of your analysis, the clarity of your prose, and the originality and persuasiveness of your thesis.

Your essay should be between 800–1,200 words. Use MLA Format for quotations and citations.

See drmarkwomack.com/mla-style/: “Document Format,” “Citation Format,” “How to Quote Prose,” and “Documenting Sources.”

Submit your essay through the TurnItIn link on the class Blackboard page labeled “Critical Essay — Spring 2.”

Due Dates:

- **COMMENTS DEADLINE: March 30**
If you want my comments on your essay, you must submit it on or before Monday, March 30.

(Please Note: You will NOT be able to revise and then re-submit your paper after seeing my comments.)
- **FINAL DEADLINE: April 20**
Although I will make few or no comments on essays submitted after Monday, April 20, I will grade these papers just the same as those turned in by the earlier date.

Please Note:

Although you may hear some references during the lectures to two separate essays, **there is only ONE required essay for this version of the course**. You may write on either this topic or on Essay Topic 1: On a Nineteenth-century Sonnet

List of Novels

Frankenstein (1818) by MARY SHELLEY

Jane Eyre (1847) by CHARLOTTE BRONTË

Wuthering Heights (1847) by EMILY BRONTË

Vanity Fair (1848) by WILLIAM MAKESPEACE THACKERY

David Copperfield (1850) by CHARLES DICKENS

Middlemarch (1872) by GEORGE ELIOT

The Way We Live Now (1875) by ANTHONY TROLLOPE

Tess of the d'Urbervilles (1891) by THOMAS HARDY

The Picture of Dorian Gray (1891) by OSCAR WILDE

Howards End (1910) by E. M. FORSTER

Although I've provided the text of these chapters on the class website, I would urge you to consult a good, scholarly edition of the book. You can usually count on a Norton or a Penguin edition to provide good annotations and glosses.

And remember to look up any word in the chapter you don't know or are unsure of. You can't begin to understand a text, let alone analyze it, if you don't know what the words mean.