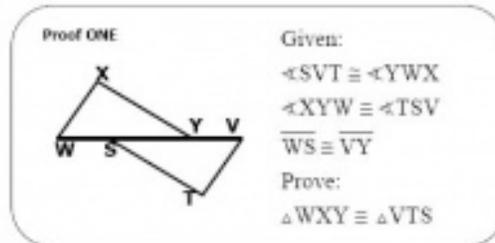


Making Academic Arguments about Literature

In mathematics, a “proof” is a step-by-step demonstration, based on certain given facts, that a certain statement is necessarily true. In the geometric proof below, you are given two triangles and facts about how those triangles are related, and asked to prove that a statement is true based on this information. The left-hand column shows the steps being taken, and the right-hand column gives an explanation of why each step is valid. Because all the steps are shown, anyone with a knowledge of geometry should be able to follow the proof.



| | |
|-------------------------------------|--------------------|
| $\angle SVT \cong \angle YWX$ | Given |
| $\angle XYW \cong \angle TSV$ | Given |
| $\overline{WS} \cong \overline{VY}$ | Given |
| $\overline{SY} \cong \overline{SY}$ | Reflexive Property |
| $\overline{WY} \cong \overline{VS}$ | Addition Postulate |
| $\triangle WXY \cong \triangle VTS$ | ASA |

Although writing about literature is far from mathematical, the concept of a “proof” is a useful metaphor for thinking about how arguments work in academic writing.

In academic writing about literature, the “given” information is the text itself. Anyone who reads *Green Grass, Running Water* has the same words in the same order. Any interpretation of the text has to be based in what the text actually says (not in what you think the author meant, or what you feel or believe as a reader).

As a writer, you get to choose what statement you will “prove” based on this given information. **This statement that you are proving is called a “claim.”** Rather than proving that your claim is absolutely, objectively true, you will be proving that your interpretation of the text is a valid interpretation.

Because in geometry there are not multiple interpretations of how many degrees are in a triangle, when you write a proof you don’t typically have to justify why the proof is important, just why it’s correct. **Because there are multiple valid interpretations of the same literary text, you also need to show that it is important to read the text the way you are suggesting.** The reason that a reader should care about your claim is called the “stakes” of the argument. An argument’s stakes answer the questions “so what?” and “who cares?,” and stakes are often the most difficult part of an argument about a literary text, because stakes are usually tied to a disciplinary conversation.

In academic writing about literature, each quote that is presented as evidence needs to be analyzed so the reader can follow the steps that lead to the interpretation. The process of framing, contextualizing, and analyzing quotations and using them as evidence is the foundation of any well-supported academic argument about literature.

Conventions for Writing about Literature

The following are some conventions for writing about literature. Following these conventions will keep you from making statements that could be seen as fallacies, and could therefore make your argument less convincing.

* **Write about literature in the present tense.** Because the events in literary texts are fictional (or fictionalized), they “happen” each time they are read. In this sense, they are ongoing, not past. To express this, writers talk about literary events in the present tense.

Example: Lionel inadvertently gets involved in the AIM occupation of Wounded Knee when he goes to Salt Lake City to present a paper at a conference.

* **Focus on the text rather than the author.** We can’t know why Thomas King made any of the choices in the novel—and even if we could, the reasons for his choices are not as important (for our purposes) as the effects of those choices as they play out in the novel. Many writers also contradict themselves when they talk about why they made certain choices in a novel... It’s often safer to trust the text than the author!

Author: Thomas King wants to show how complex Native identity is.

Text: *Green Grass, Running Water* argues for the complexity of Native identity.

* **Focus on the text rather than the reader.** We can’t know how a given reader will react to the novel, we can only know what the novel argues, implies, suggests, etc. If you were surprised or offended or delighted by a certain passage in the novel, it doesn’t necessarily mean that other readers felt the same way. Instead, we can talk (very carefully!) about the reading experience that the novel offers.

Reader: Depictions of Biblical characters interacting with characters from other creation myths in *Green Grass, Running Water* make readers question whether the Bible’s ideas of good and evil are the only possible ones.

Text: *Green Grass, Running Water* complicates the ideas of good and evil that are set forth in the Bible by depicting Biblical characters interacting with characters from other creation myths. This strategy offers readers a context for examining their own beliefs.

* **Focus on the text rather than the world.** Although texts often make arguments about social issues in the larger world, a novel is not sufficient evidence to make a sociological, political, or philosophical claim (i.e. a claim about how the world works).

World: Large development projects have had a deleterious effect on Native communities by degrading their land, and the Grand Baheen Dam in *Green Grass, Running Water* demonstrates how unjust these projects can be.

Text: Through its portrayal of the Grand Baheen Dam, *Green Grass, Running Water* suggests that large development projects have had a deleterious effect on Native communities by degrading their land, and that these intrusions into Native land are fundamentally unjust.