

# How to write a University Paper—a High School English Lesson

*developed and piloted by Steven Van Zoost, May 2011*

This activity exposes high school students to university expectations of students' English essays. The activity could easily be repeated or modified for multiple university model essays. In this lesson, Angela Johnston wrote the model essay in her first year of studying at Acadia University for the course English 1406. Her essay is a response to Philip Larkin's poem, "Home is so sad." Angela Johnson's model essay is available online with university professors' comments for review. In the activity, high school students are able to identify the gaps between their own writing and the expectations for a university literary analysis.

## Procedure:

### Part A: Becoming familiar with the text

1. The high school students are provided with a copy of the text that is analyzed in the university student's paper. In this case, it is Philip Larkin's poem, "Home is so sad." They are asked record their reflections about the text either in the margins or as annotations (e.g., using footnotes).
2. The students are then assigned a partner to share their reflections and discuss the text.
3. The teacher then shows the instructions that were given to the university student from his/her professor (see Appendix A). The high school students create thesis statements about the text that respond to the assignment instructions. The students record their thesis statement on a cue card/ notepaper.
4. Forming a large circle, the students pass their thesis statements to the student to their immediate right and begin reading the various thesis statements as they are passed around the circle. This continues until the student received his/her own thesis statement that has returned around the circle. If needed, the teacher can review strategies for creating better thesis statements such as identifying how to change a thesis statement if it is too broad or too narrow in scope.

### Part B: Reading a model university paper

5. The high school students are then provided with a print copy of a model essay from a university student. In this case, [the essay written by Angela Johnston](#). The high school students are asked to underline what stands-out to them about the university student's writing.
6. The high school students are then asked to re-read the model essay and to identify two places in the essay where they could comment about the four writing criteria identified below. Students use a letter code to mark where they have comments to offer about each of the following writing criteria:
  - a. (O) Organization and Format
  - b. (C) Correctness and Choice
  - c. (T) Thought and Detail Plus
  - d. (L) Literary and Rhetorical Matter
7. The students then meet with a partner to explain their observations about the writing criteria. As warranted, the teacher may wish to have students share their observations in a full-class discussion.

### **Part C: Reading professors' comments about the model essay**

8. The high school students then [view the model essay online](#) so that they can read what the university professors have noted about the four writing criteria.
9. The high school students use a template (such as the one found in Appendix B) to track their reflections about what surprised them about the professors' comments and what the high school students identify about their own learning needs in relation to writing a literary analysis.

### **Part D: Directing further instruction**

10. The students submit their reflections (e.g., Appendix B) to the teacher who can then focus continued instruction that responds to students' targeted learning needs about writing a literary analysis. For example, the teacher may receive students comments such as:
  - "I need to work on my introduction and conclusion paragraphs."
  - "I need to get better at correctly citing sentences from the poem and also referencing the work I'm analyzing in general."
  - "I need to learn how to expand my critical thinking and really explain what is happening. I also need to improve how I can go beyond the writer's words and get to the real meaning."
11. The teacher can thematically cluster the student-identified learning needs and may offer the class a series of mini-lessons in response to these needs, or work with students in smaller focus groups, or work with students one-on-one in a writer's conference. Because of the array of learning needs that the students may identify, it is important that the teacher consider alternative ways of supporting students including providing additional resources (websites, writer's reference books, etc.).
12. As a follow-up, teachers may wish to assign a similar task with a different text(s) for students to practice their literary analysis skills. At the onset, teachers may wish to use a wiki in a Moodle environment to create a collaborative literary analysis where the purpose is to practice and share writing strategies rather than focus on individual student assessment. Following a class-created literary analysis, students may write their own essay.

### **Additional Teacher Notes:**

- When a variety of university model essays are available, teachers may consider incorporating the model essays into specific genre studies (a unit about poetry, short stories, drama, etc.). Alternatively, teachers may pre-plan how to incorporate the model essays into their course design as they pertain to thematic units of study (leaving home, place-based identity, etc.).
- Teachers may wish to use literary analysis essays as a "Demand Response" that is completed in one class. Students are provided a new text and expected to create a literary analysis essay in one class.

## **Appendix A**

### **First Year**

#### Literary Analysis of a Poem:

Short Formal Literary Analysis (Persuasive): Poem Explication, English 1406: Writing and Reading Critically. Length: 4-5 pages (Times New Roman 12pt.) MLA style.

This essay is based on Philip Larkin's poem "Home is so Sad." You can read this poem at:  
<https://www.poets.org/viewmedia.php/prmMID/16659>

#### **ASSIGNMENT:**

Topic: A discussion of literary devices and themes in a poem of your choice from our anthology. You are encouraged to design your own essay topic, but can use any of the topics we discussed in class. [Note: Proposal, Outline, and Draft submissions were required for this essay.]

Your essay will focus on a specific aspect of, or devices in, the poem and provide a persuasive analysis thereof.

**Appendix B**

Name of Student:

**Reflection**

What surprised you?	What do you need to learn how to do?

# **Feedback for high school liaison committee**

How to write a University Paper - Sample Essay  
Angela Johnston English 1406

"Home Is So Sad" - Philip Larkin

Should other high school students do the activity that you just did? Why or why not? What should be changed?

What suggestions do you have for the website? (professors' comments, hyperlinks, etc.)