

Guide for Writing in Modern Languages and Literatures (Spanish, German, French, and Chinese)

By Dr. Katy Ross

About Writing in Modern Languages and Literatures

Much like essays that you might have written in an English class, the purpose of most writing assignments in the languages is to carefully explore the text you are analyzing and to continue to sharpen your written competency in the language. Although there are many types of writing within our discipline, most of them are based on analysis of a written or visual text. Your essays must be original, thoughtful, and thesis-driven; you should state a complex main idea toward the end of your introduction, then pursue your argument with sharp insights, strong interpretive detail, and judicious citation. In your essays for modern language and literature courses, you should strive to develop a strong argument that says something new.

Types of Writing in Modern Languages and Literatures

You can expect to encounter a variety of writing in your upper-level language and literature courses. Generally, you can think of that writing as meeting one of the three following purposes:

1. Narrative or Recording Writing

Narrative or recording writing tells a story. That story might be historical (for example, your paper might tell the true story of events, such as an autobiographical or historical recount), or it might be textual (for example, your paper might tell readers the “story” of a text by summarizing it).

About this guide

This guide contains
the following sections:

- About Writing in Modern Languages and Literatures
- Types of Writing in Modern Languages and Literatures
- Textual Analysis and Close Reading
- Evidence in Modern Languages and Literatures
- Conventions of Writing in Modern Languages & Literatures
- Citations & Formatting

The Disciplinary Writing Guides are designed to provide an introduction to the conventions, or rules, of writing in different subjects. These guides have been designed by Southwestern professors to help you understand what will be expected of you in your classes.

2. Explanatory or Exploratory Writing

A middle ground between narrative/recording writing and persuasive writing, the goal of explanatory or exploratory writing is to help you to think through possibilities for argument. Explanatory or exploratory papers might, for example, include an investigation of themes and motifs in a text, or they may trace causes and effects.

3. Persuasive Writing

The goal of persuasive writing is to convince your reader of an argument. You might craft an argument about a particular issue, explore more than one perspective on an important issue, or ask complex questions about other cultures and articulate answers that reflect multiple cultural perspectives.

You will use these approaches across a range of assignments throughout your Modern Languages and Literatures courses. Below, you will find a few of the most common assignments you'll see in your classes.

Journals

These assignments are normally less formal and are designed to encourage you to take time to think about a text and your perceptions of it. These narrative assignments may also be used to get you to start thinking about the thematic questions that help shape a class.

Short Paragraphs

These assignments respond to specific questions about a text, or they draw a connection between a text and another piece of information. A short paragraph may be the starting point for a longer essay.

Short Essays (1-3 pages) or Long Essays (4-6 pages)

These assignments generally focus on a specific question that the course addresses. The essay will ask you to address this question in connection to the text. In longer essays, you are asked to work within the persuasive genre, taking a stance and crafting an argument about an issue or exploring multiple perspectives.

Summaries

These assignments ask you to summarize your reading in order to confirm understanding of it. They are narrating/recording assignments that are designed to check your comprehension.

Reaction Papers

These assignments are normally less formal than essays. They may expand on journals, and ask you to take

time to react to a text and consider how it relates to the major questions of the class.

Book Reviews

These assignments ask you to write a formal, academic response to a text, bringing up concerns or questions that arise from reading the book. These types of assignments may begin with a narrative summary, but they should also include explanatory or exploratory writing, in which you think about themes and motifs or causes and effects.

Research Papers

Unlike the shorter essays described above, these assignments require you to research your own topics and cite sources in order to support your ideas. These assignments combine all three writing styles in order to analyze, describe, and summarize the text on which the writing is focused. You will normally write a few drafts of larger research papers, and many of the shorter listed here may help you to write your research paper.

Phonetic Transcription

In linguistics courses, this is a common assignment that allows students to analyze spoken language. Phonetic transcriptions are designed to have you apply your knowledge of principles learned in the class concerning syllable structure, resyllabification, phonemes and the distribution of their allophones, and regional variation.

In the next section, we'll explore two common assignments – Textual Analysis & Close Reading.

Textual Analysis and Close Reading

Textual Analysis

A textual analysis paper is the basic form of writing in a literature/cultural studies course. These papers typically include a formal plot summary and are formed around a thesis that makes an argument about the text.

Textual analyses often ask you to engage with one of more of the questions listed below.

- In which cultural contexts is this text important?
- What features of a genre make this text a good example of that genre?
- What kinds of approaches or theoretical frameworks would be valuable/interesting for reading this text?
- How does the author use language in the text? Are there word choices or verb tenses that affect the meaning of the text? Does the author play with language usage?
- How does the text represent and make meaning of categories of difference, such as age, gender, sexuality, race, ethnicity, socio-economic factors, ability, etc.?
- How are contemporary values and cultural assumptions reflected in the reading of a text? Are you aware of how your own cultural rules and biases might shape the reading of a text from another culture?
- How is this text influenced or explained by looking at other kinds of texts?
- How does the text encourage us to rethink our paradigms for looking at the world?
- How do you demonstrate sophisticated understanding of the complexity of elements important to members of another culture in relation to its history, values, politics, communication styles?

For more on textual analysis, you might check out Alan McKee's "[What is Textual Analysis,](#)" in *Textual Analysis: A Beginner's Guide*. (Sage, 2003)

Close Reading

Many upper level courses will ask for a close reading of a text or image. This type of writing asks you to focus on a small passage as a step towards a larger analysis. Your goal in a close reading is to pay special attention to the language of a text. You should explain why certain authorial choices (**how** the text is written) work to convey meaning (**what** the text says). Many times a close reading can be the first step of a larger textual analysis paper.

For some helpful questions to consider as you begin your close reading, you might visit Kip Wheeler's guide, "[Close Reading of a Literary Passage](#)" or the video "[CRIT: Close Reading Interpretive Tool](#)" from the University of Texas, Austin.

Using Evidence in Modern Languages and Literatures Courses

In the languages, we cite **primary sources** (such as the original text) and **secondary sources** (academic articles about the original text). The method is the same when analyzing film or other media.

Generally speaking, it is not necessary to translate a source when citing it. Although paraphrasing can be useful, it can sometimes lead to unintentional plagiarism, and therefore should only be used when you are not able to quote from the source. When looking for secondary sources, you should limit yourself to academic sources, such as journal articles and book chapters. **We especially recommend using the MLA International Bibliography to find reliable, academically rigorous articles.**

Conventions of Writing

In the MLL, we adhere to national standards when it comes to writing. **Writing in modern languages is in a formal register, eschewing the use of**

According to the national ACTFL 2012 guidelines for writing in a second language, “writers at the advanced level are characterized by the ability to write routine informal and some formal correspondence, as well as narratives, descriptions, and summaries of a factual nature. They can narrate and describe in the major time frames of past, present, and future, using paraphrasing and elaboration to provide clarity. Advanced-level writers produce connected discourse of paragraph length and structure. At this level, writers show good control of the most frequently used structures and generic vocabulary, allowing them to be understood by those unaccustomed to the writing of non-natives”

complex, with great attention to details of aspect and vocabulary.

As in most writing in the humanities, **thesis and topic sentences are very important, as are a strong introduction and conclusion.**

personal pronouns and passive voice.

(Note: There are some differences based on the language. For example, the German language uses passive voice frequently.)

Sentence structure should be

Here are a few examples of strong theses drawn from former student papers:

Spanish:

Por su uso de la ausencia tanto como la presencia del hombre dominicano Flores de otro mundo reconstruye los estereotipos racializados y sexualizados del padre negro ausente y el afro-dominicano seductor-amenazador.

La novela promueve una identidad española basada en un deseo de enfrentarse con un pasado reprimido y doloroso y, simultáneamente, de mantener cierto nivel de estabilidad al relegar lo político a la sombra.

French:

Le roman met en relief l'importance d'une identité ancrée dans un désir de faire face à un passé difficile et, en même temps, d'entretenir un certain niveau de stabilité en mettant entre parenthèses les problèmes d'ordre politique.

Citation and Formatting

In literature and culture classes, we use the MLA guidelines for citation. This style of citation uses in-text parenthetical citations that come at the end of sentences to tell readers the author's name and the page number from which the cited information is drawn. MLA generally uses footnotes instead of endnotes, and notes are generally used to expand on a point, rather than to guide readers to a cited source.

In linguistics classes, we use APA style. This style also relies on parenthetical citations, but they include the author's last name & the year of publication. Page numbers are only necessary in APA style when a direct quotation is included in the work. Generally, APA style discourages the use of footnotes and endnotes.

For more guidelines and models of these citation styles, see the [“Student Resources”](#) section of the website of the Debby Ellis Writing Center.

You should always write in Times New Roman font. Use 12-point font in the body of your paper and 10-point font for footnotes. Unless your instructor specifies otherwise, all papers should be double-spaced with one-inch margins.

A Few Tips for Avoiding Common Errors

- Pay special attention to the quality and accuracy of your prose by using appropriate reference tools such as dictionaries and grammar guides. **Do not use an online translator. This is akin to plagiarism.**
- **Do not write in English first and translate.** This makes for awkward phrasing in another language.
- **Check your accents and spelling.** Accent errors can detract from an otherwise strong paper.
- Revise and edit. **No one writes the best paper after one draft.** Spend time revising, editing, and proofreading, focusing particularly on vocabulary choices and language usage. Make use of the free MLL tutoring hours.
- **Avoid plot summary and generalities.** Provide a fresh, daring, original point of view. Read the text closely and include abundant examples. Map out a new critical horizon that will challenge readers to think differently. Support your deep knowledge with a range of cited and carefully interpreted detail. **When writing about longer works, it is absolutely essential that you convey a thorough understanding of the text.** You can do this by examining several aspects of the text to explore its full arc and impact.