Your literature instructor has assigned an essay about a novel or short story. Where do you begin? You've attended class regularly, completed assigned readings, and paid attention during class. Now, you're ready for some extra help.

Writing about literature allows you to explore ideas and relate your interests to your reading. Check out these three examples written by Meramec students:

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**Story**: “The Short Happy Life of Francis Macomber” by Ernest Hemingway

**Plot**: A fabulously wealthy married couple (think Mr. and Mrs. Donald Trump here) on an African safari discuss the future of their shaky relationship. At the end of the story, when the husband is being charged by a water buffalo, the wife blows his head off with a shotgun.

**The Controversy**: Did Margot Macomber murder her husband, or did she shoot him accidentally?

**A Student Response**: A student with many years of experience deer hunting argued that Margot shot her husband accidentally. To prove his thesis, he tracked every gun used in the story and explained its properties (bore, weight, length, “kick” after firing, etc.). He showed convincingly that the gun she grabbed from the back of the jeep when she saw her husband in danger was too heavy for her to handle.

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**Story**: “The Yellow Wallpaper” by Charlotte Perkins Gilman

**Plot**: A woman suffering from depression after the birth of her child is taken by her husband (a doctor) for a three-month recovery in the country. Confined to an upstairs bedroom, she spends her days staring at the ugly yellow wallpaper, imagining that a woman is trapped behind the pattern there, and slowly goes insane.

**The Controversy**: Here are the last two sentences of the story: “Now why should that man [her husband John] have fainted? But he did, and right across my path by the wall, so that I had to creep over him every time!”

**A Student Response**: A student in a psychology class—knowing that most men have never fainted in their lives—answered the question “Why should that man have fainted?” She reread the details of the wife’s recovery. Tracing the wide gap between what John thought was happening and what was really happening, she showed why he fainted.
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**Annotate and Highlight Your Text:** Your argumentative essay requires support from the story itself. Copy direct quotes and page numbers exactly for easy reference. Mark important scenes, dialog, or comments in the story. Highlight in several colors to track themes. For example, the student who traced shotguns in the Hemingway story highlighted every gun reference. Then he could easily find those elements in the story.

**Avoid Plot Summary:** It’s very tempting to simply retell the story instead of proving your thesis using the actions and dialog of the characters as evidence. (We resisted the temptation: our plot summary of Hemingway’s 22-page story takes only two sentences.) Ask yourself, “Does each paragraph support my thesis about the story?” Your goal is to prove an intriguing point, not rehash the plot.

**BRAINSTORMING QUESTIONS**

1. Who are the main characters? Who is the antagonist? Protagonist?
2. Do you feel sympathy toward any characters? Dislike toward others?
3. What contrasts emerge between characters? What similarities?
4. What do you find interesting, unusual or intriguing about the characters?
5. What motivates the characters to act?
6. Do the characters understand the consequences of their own actions?
7. How does the setting or time frame enhance the story?
8. What recurring images or symbols enrich the story?
9. Do parts of the story seem ironic? Does the title emphasize that irony?
10. What seems to be the theme or point of the story?