

Writing a Thesis Paper About a Poem

Every paper that you write has a thesis. In a summary paper, your thesis is a statement of the meaning of the essay(s) that you are summarizing. In a critique paper, your thesis is your own view or position, which you put forward in response to the essay that you are critiquing. In a thesis paper, however, your main purpose is not to summarize or respond to other essays, but to develop an idea of your own in greater depth and detail as your essay proceeds from beginning to end.

For your Unit 3 paper, your thesis will be your own interpretation and statement of what the poem *To Autumn* means. You can use the readings of *To Autumn* that we've discussed in class to get ideas for your essay, but the idea itself should be original and unique, the product of your own emotional and/or intellectual response to the poem. (Although the tips that follow are specific to your Unit 3 assignment, the concepts presented can be applied generally to any thesis paper.)

To come up with a thesis, answer two related sets of questions:

1. What is this poem really about?
2. Why did Keats write the poem as he did? Why did he use the words, the rhythm, the images, the metaphors that he uses in the poem?

Figure out your answer to these questions, and then set out to prove that you are right. For example, you might think that *To Autumn* says something about Keats's attitude towards death. This is a good start, but is not specific enough. You need to read the poem closely and figure out exactly what Keats is saying about death (or about life, or youth, or age, or maturity, etc.). To prove your thesis, you need to find several ways in which the poem—the words on the page—supports your thesis. These instances of your thesis will be the supporting points that you develop in the body of your paper. Describe how, in these examples of your thesis, the words, the rhythm, the images, the metaphors, and the other literary devices that Keats uses support your view of the poem.

As you describe these examples in your paper you are developing your thesis. In the process, you may find that your thinking about the poem—and thus your thesis—changes. This is a good result, indicating that your understanding of the poem is deepening as you write. It also means that you need to revise your thesis, which of course involves some rewriting of the paper.

Your paper needs to have the following sections:

Introduction
Review of the literature
Argument
Conclusion

The following pages discuss these sections.

Introduction

In your introductory paragraph:

- a. Identify the poem that you are writing your thesis about. State the author's name, and the poem's title and date of publication. For our purposes, this is Keats's *To Autumn*.
- b. In one or two sentences, introduce what the poem is about and how it is written. For example, you probably want to talk about the fact that *To Autumn* is an ode to Autumn, and you could also add some background information about when Keats wrote it. You could in a sentence also preview what you are going to say about the poem.
- c. State your own thesis. Also, briefly describe the points that you will use in your essay to support this thesis.

See pages 3 and 4 for examples of introductory paragraphs.

2. Review of the Literature—Summary of Scholarly Essays

Summarize the scholarly essays that you are using in your essay. One of these can be an essay that I have given the class, and—for 3 points of credit—the other can be an essay that you have found yourself. These essays should relate to your thesis, but your thesis must be original and thus at least somewhat different from the theses of the articles.

Your summary should for this paper consist of 2 – 4 paragraphs that identify the thesis of each essay, summarize its content, and indicate how these are related to your own argument about the poem.

Remember to refer continually to the author of each essay in its summary. Use signal phrases as you have done in your summary and critique papers.

The purpose of a review of the literature in a scholarly paper is to show that you have read all other scholarly work that is relevant to your essay. You need to show that you know what other scholars have said to demonstrate that what you are saying is new and significant. Although that is the purpose for a full-blown scholarly essay written at the graduate or post-graduate level, for our purposes on this paper, you need to summarize only two articles in order to get some practical experience in writing a review of the literature.

3. Argument

Your argument is your development of your own thesis. This will take up most of the body of your paper, and will for this paper require about 3 – 4 pages. In this section, cover each of the points in the poem that support your reading or interpretation. Make sure that, when you move on to a new supporting point you signal this move with a phrase that indicates this clearly.

4. Conclusion

In your concluding paragraph, recapitulate and summarize the argument—the thesis—that you have developed in your essay, and restate your thesis as the conclusion of your paper.

Following are two sample introductory paragraphs for your Unit 3 thesis paper on Keats's *To Autumn*. In class we will discuss how you might use these paragraphs as formal models for your own paragraphs or as means of generating ideas.

Sample Introductory Paragraph 1

John Keats composed *To Autumn* in September of 1819, and letters that he wrote at the time to his brother and sister-in-law, George and Georgiana Keats, and to his friend Reynolds, indicate that he was inspired by the walks that he took that September through the countryside of Winchester. Keats's ode encompasses multiple meanings, for he addresses and describes autumn as a time of ripeness, growth, and the plenty of harvest; and also as a sleepy time of stillness, a mournful time that seems to anticipate the death of winter. In this essay, I explore how *To Autumn* progresses from the ripeness of autumn's harvest, in the first stanza; to total satiation and stillness, in the second stanza; to a final anticipation of winter and death in the last stanza. I argue that, in this progression from ripeness to satiety to death, Keats develops the idea that to experience the beauty of life at its very fullest is also to approach the inevitability of death, and that life and death are thus inextricably intertwined.

In this paper, your argument would work through analyses and close readings of stanza 1, stanza 2, and stanza 3. These close readings would need to support your thesis, of course.

Sample Introductory Paragraph 2

John Keats composed *To Autumn* in September of 1819, and letters that he wrote at the time to his brother and sister-in-law, George and Georgiana Keats, and to his friend Reynolds, indicate that he was inspired by the walks that he took that September through the countryside of Winchester. Keats's ode encompasses multiple meanings, for he addresses and describes autumn as a time of ripeness, growth, and the plenty of harvest; and also as a sleepy time of stillness, a mournful time that seems to anticipate the death of winter. In this essay, I explore how Keats uses onomatopoeia, metaphor, personification, and imagery to develop these contrasting and ambiguous views of autumn. I argue that, ultimately, Keats uses these poetic techniques to develop a rich and ambiguous view of autumn that represents both the beauty of life at its very fullest and the inevitability of death.

In this paper, your argument would work through Keats's use of onomatopoeia, metaphor, personification, and imagery to develop this idea of autumn.