

Conclusion

What's Your Method?

On the Structure of Research Papers in Literature

It would be nice to copy out the recipe of an excellent research paper in two paragraphs for everyone to use. Yet there seems to be more to this recipe than a list of ingredients and a list of instructions for blending them. This recipe in question should be more like Harry Potter's *Potions* book in Snape's class: when Harry works very hard to follow instructions of his brand new *Potions* book, he usually fails to achieve anything, but he gets very good at Potions when he finds a well-fingered old book with extra comments jotted over the official recipe. In *Potions*, the additional advice makes all the difference. Let us say, then, that this recipe here is somewhat dog-eared and marked: it is both an official recipe on aspects to consider when you write an essay on literature, but it is also a note with additional advice, with a checklist of questions to consider before writing.

A research paper in literature has three indispensable ingredients: a text, a problem, and a method. I guess it is no surprise that I list the "text," the reason for the inclusion of the obvious is that for a BA or MA research paper you need a very specific, limited body of primary texts to work with. In other words, you cannot include twelve books of the same author to analyze or six books from different authors to compare: that is simply too much. You need one or two novels or dramas or a handful of poems at most in order to produce an analysis in which you can actually argue for a reading. The second ingredient, the "problem" is equally basic but perhaps more problematic: how to determine what the odious research question of the paper will be. The problem, very simply, should be something that is really a question of interest for you as a person. Also, it should be formulated as a question: preferably a wh-question starting with "why" or "how" with reference to your primary text. However, this grammatical question can only be thought of and formulated if you already have a view of the secondary literature on the text and on the problem you have chosen. Reading the reception, a cluster of secondary texts about your topic helps you understand how you want to explain or approach your problem. You can hear the voices of the critics as they take part in a discussion about the text, and you are invited to join this discussion by taking sides with or by arguing with some of these voices.

At this point a third ingredient, perhaps not so obvious as the former two, is required: you need to think of your method, of a way you approach the problem you are writing about. This approach will also be the reason why you can accept the opinion of some critics you have read but argue with others.

Just to simplify the abstract explanation above, let me give you an example. As happens, you have taken a course on 19th century American women writers and you liked Edith Wharton's *The House of Mirth*, possibly because you have seen the film, too. You are personally interested in the story of the heroine, Lily Bart, and you ask yourself why this charming woman of all others was excluded socially and had to commit suicide at the end of the story. In other words, you are interested in the social dynamics of a NYC elite class at the turn of the century. How can you formulate your problem in more delicate terms? You look at some articles on the subject and notice that different scholars describe the social dynamics you are interested in differently, as if correcting each other's views all the time. There is one who describes the duality of NYC social life in the book: old social values and habits as opposed to new ones Lily Bart is not able or is unwilling to acquire. Another shows that Lily's unwillingness to change her code of behavior is connected to her lonely struggle for independence in a male dominated US social world. Another critic joins in to say that the customs and habits of Lily's set can be described and explained ethnographically. Last but not least, a woman discusses Lily's behavior from the perspective of racial relations in the book. Lily affirms her own racial identity when she rather commits suicide than to marry a Jewish man, Rosedale, but at the same time she loses the very position in the name of which she has snubbed him. As you become interested in this racial aspect of the social dynamics, you decide to analyze racial relations in the book, and this perspective will be your approach, in other words, your methodology. Your research project has come into being at the intersection of text, reception, and method.

The structure of your research paper should bear the mark of the three aspects looked at so far: your text, your problem and its reception, your method, your reading. The first structural ingredient is an explanation about your general interest, the formulation of your problem in the guise of the research question, this will be your introduction. After this the second most important aspect to look through is the reception of the problem at hand, indicating how the diverse secondary readings relate to each other and which ones you like most. This choice will inevitably lead you to the third component to explain: your approach to the problem, your position from which you see the problem. These (second and third) components, reception and method, make up your theoretical background. Then, at long last, you can start your actual analysis of your text, a focused study of a given problem from a specific

perspective in one or two texts. Finally, you can formulate the answer to your research question in your conclusion. You can follow this methodology by discussing your problem in smaller sections, then each section has the above structure. This is more common in the case of longer papers, though. In a longer paper you can write a string of chapters arranged this way, linking them in a separate general introduction and conclusion.