Writing a Literary Analysis Essay:

From Close Reading to Defensible Argument

- Goal: move from personal reaction and plot summary to a defensible, text-grounded argument
- Analysis is interpretation and argument — not summary, evaluation, or biography
- The genre appears in high school exams, AP/IB essays, university seminars, literary journalism
- Core arc previewed: close reading → claim → evidence → analysis → revision
- Serves students, literature teachers, and independent literary learners

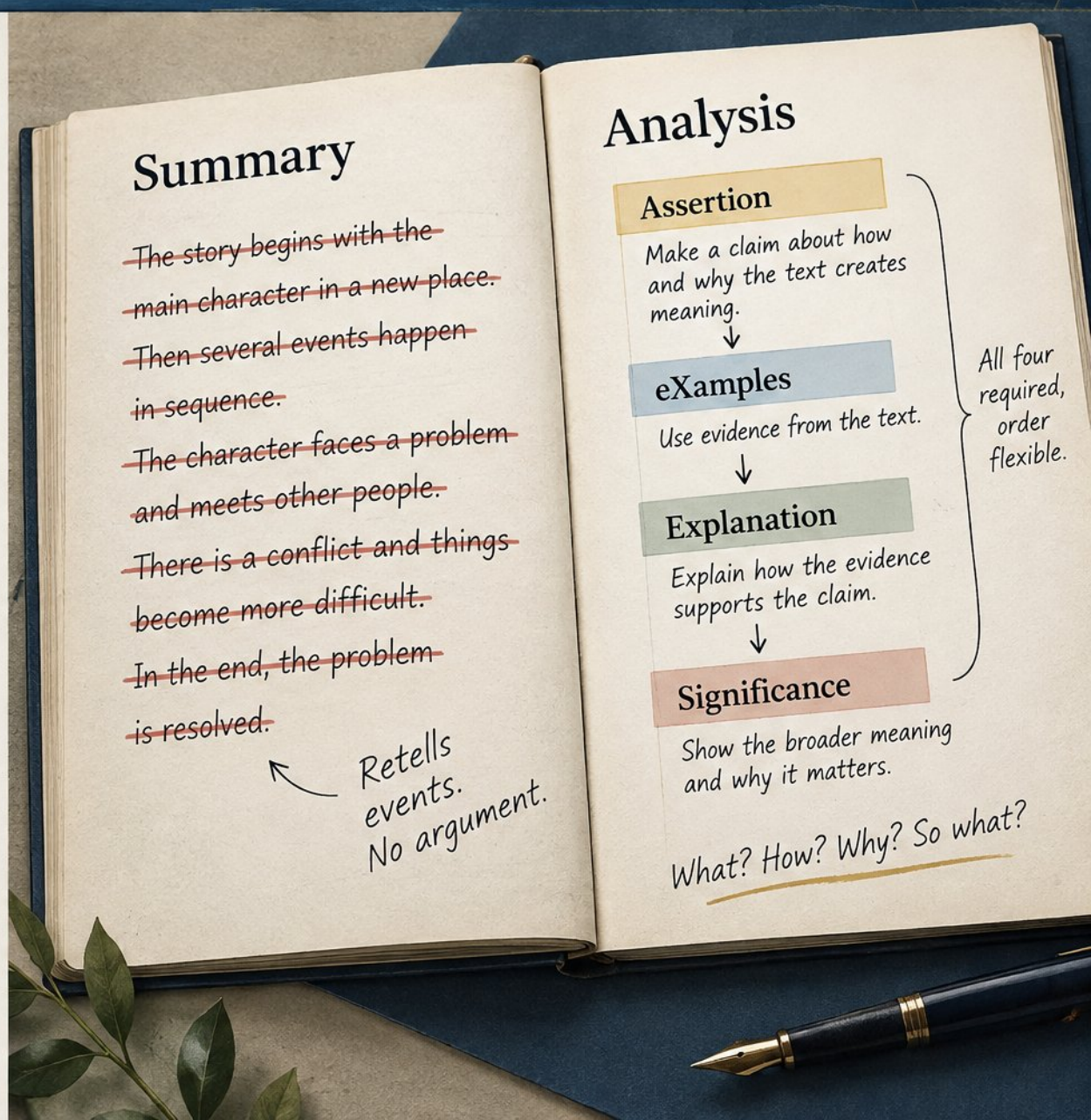


Analysis Versus Summary: Defining the Genre

READ DEEPLY • THINK CRITICALLY • WRITE WITH PURPOSE

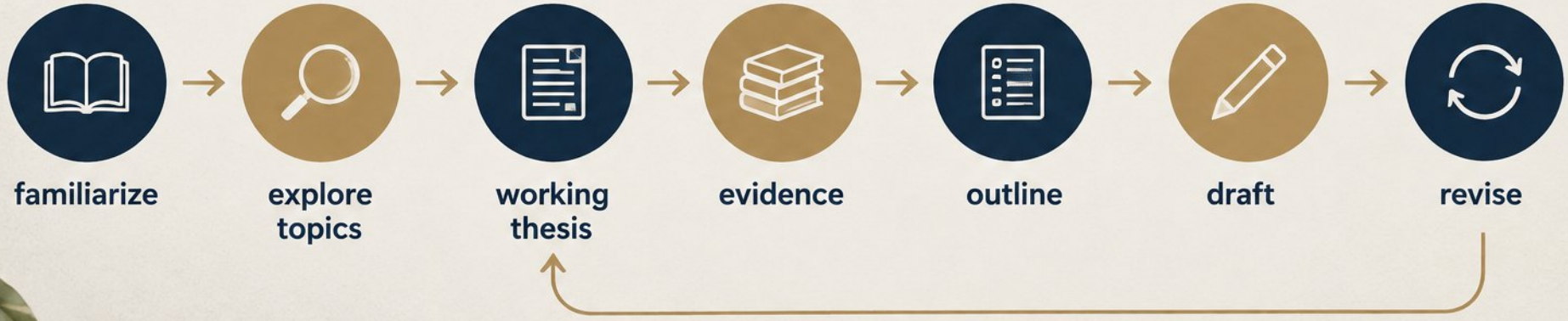
- Analysis examines, interprets, and evaluates; it argues how and why a text creates meaning
- Summary restates events without argument; analysis shows causes, effects, and significance
- AXES frame: Assertion, eXamples, Explanation, Significance — all four required, order flexible
- Apply four questions: What? How? Why? So what?
- Use present tense; assume the reader already knows the text
- Biography and historical trivia are not substitutes for interpretation

SAME TEXT. A DEEPER CONVERSATION.



Assignment Types and the Writing Workflow

- Four formats: close reading, comparative, contextual/historical, argumentative essay
- Each format reshapes scope and evidence; read the prompt first
- Workflow: familiarize → explore topics → working thesis → evidence → outline → draft → revise
- A changing thesis signals productive thinking, not failure (UNC)
- MLA style is standard; the ninth edition (2021) remains current practice



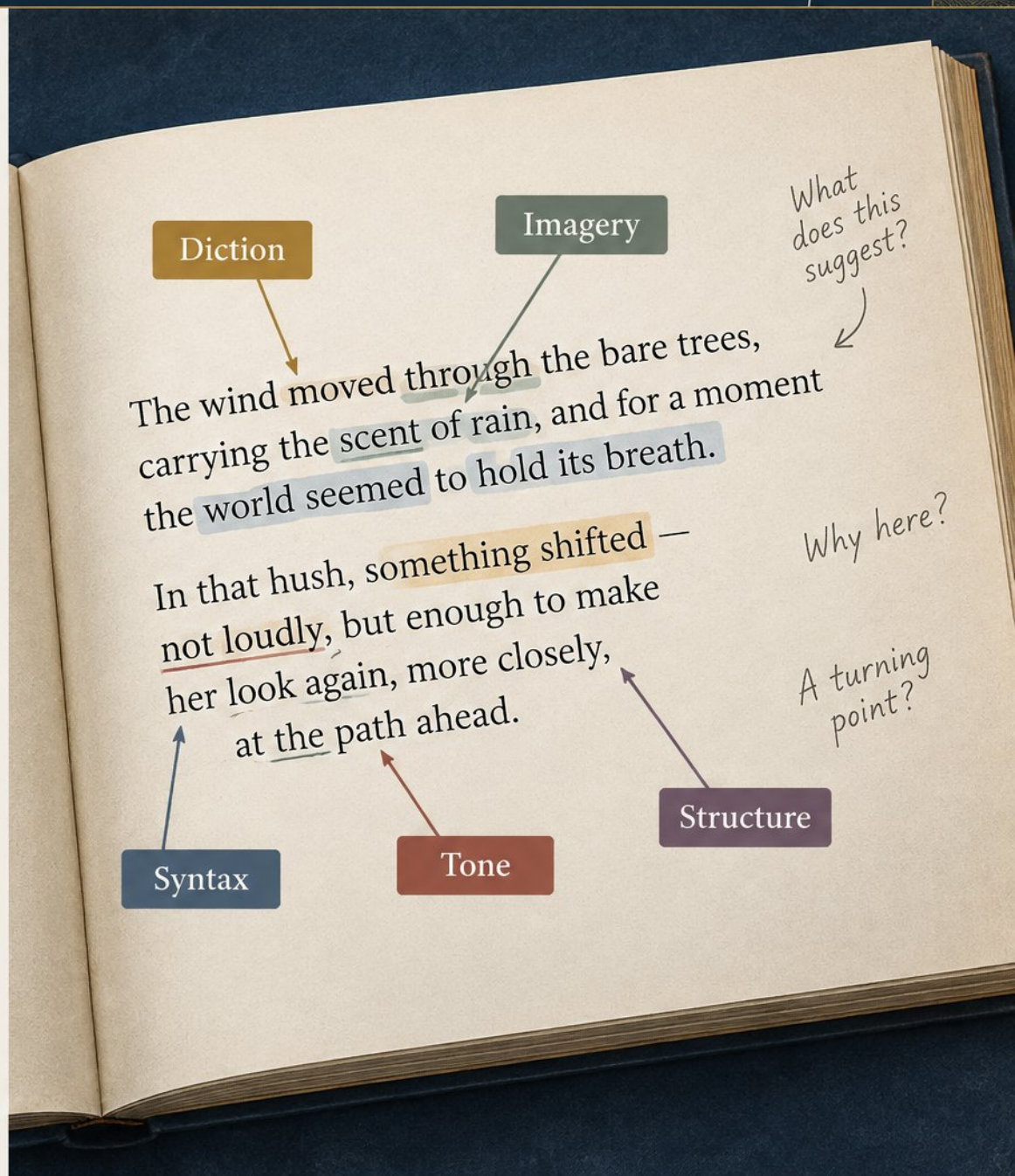


DEEPER READING
BRIGHTER IDEAS

Close Reading: *Reading for Craft, Patterns, and Meaning*

- **Close reading:** slow, attentive analysis of how a text works (UW–Madison; Purdue OWL)
- **Read at least twice:** first for meaning, then craft, then themes (Read Write Think)
- **Annotate with pen in hand:** diction, imagery, syntax, tone, structure
- **Toolkits:** fiction (narration, character, setting, conflict); poetry (sound, form, line breaks); drama (staging, subtext)
- **Separate observation from interpretation;** jot questions in the margin

READ MORE DEEPLY
THINK MORE CLEARLY



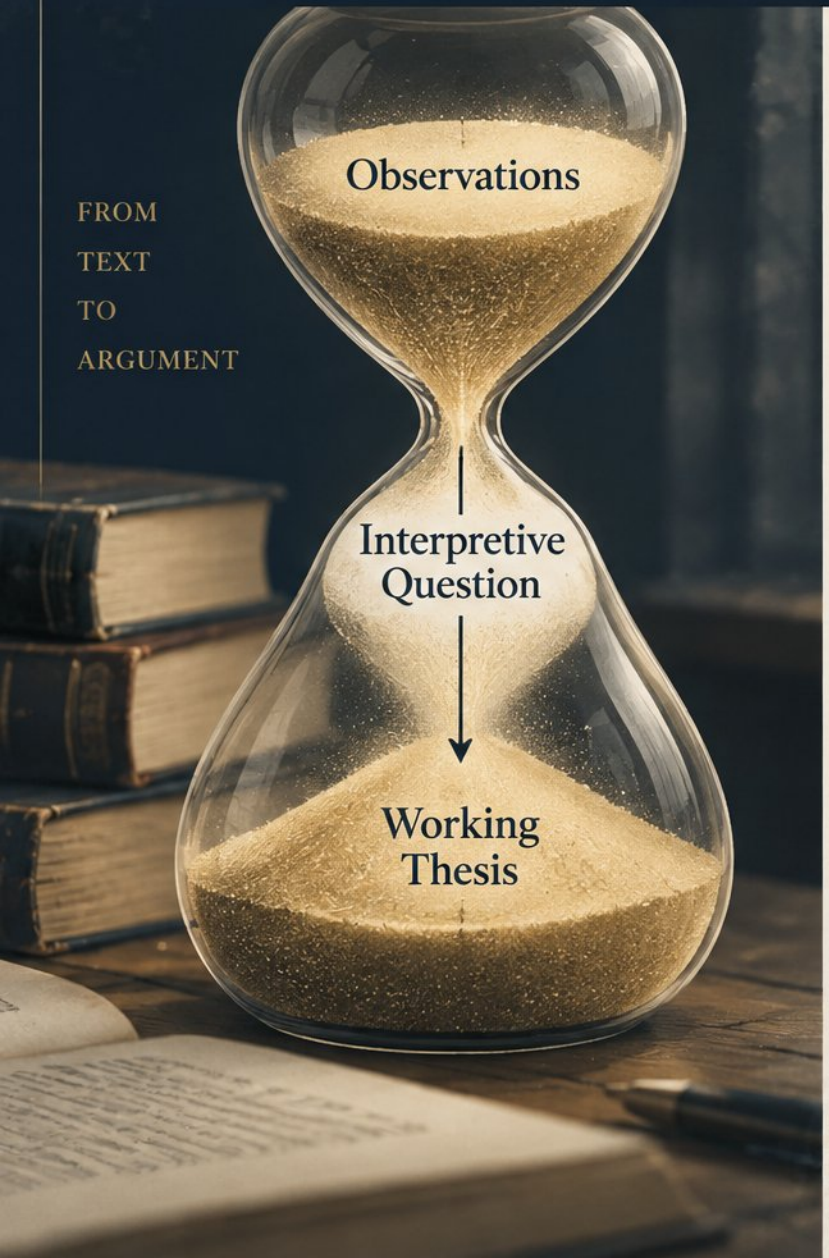
From Passages to Evidence: Building an Evidence Log

READ
ANALYZE
CONNECT
SUPPORT

- Choose passages with clear boundaries that intrigue, impress, or annoy you
- Record page or line numbers, speaker, and situation for accurate reuse
- Detail → interpretation → argument: use WHAT / HOW / WHY / SO WHAT
- Paraphrase first to confirm literal meaning before interpreting
- Compare each passage to the whole: does it add, complicate, or undermine?
- Track tensions, contradictions, and repetition across the text



Formulating an Interpretive Question and a Working Thesis

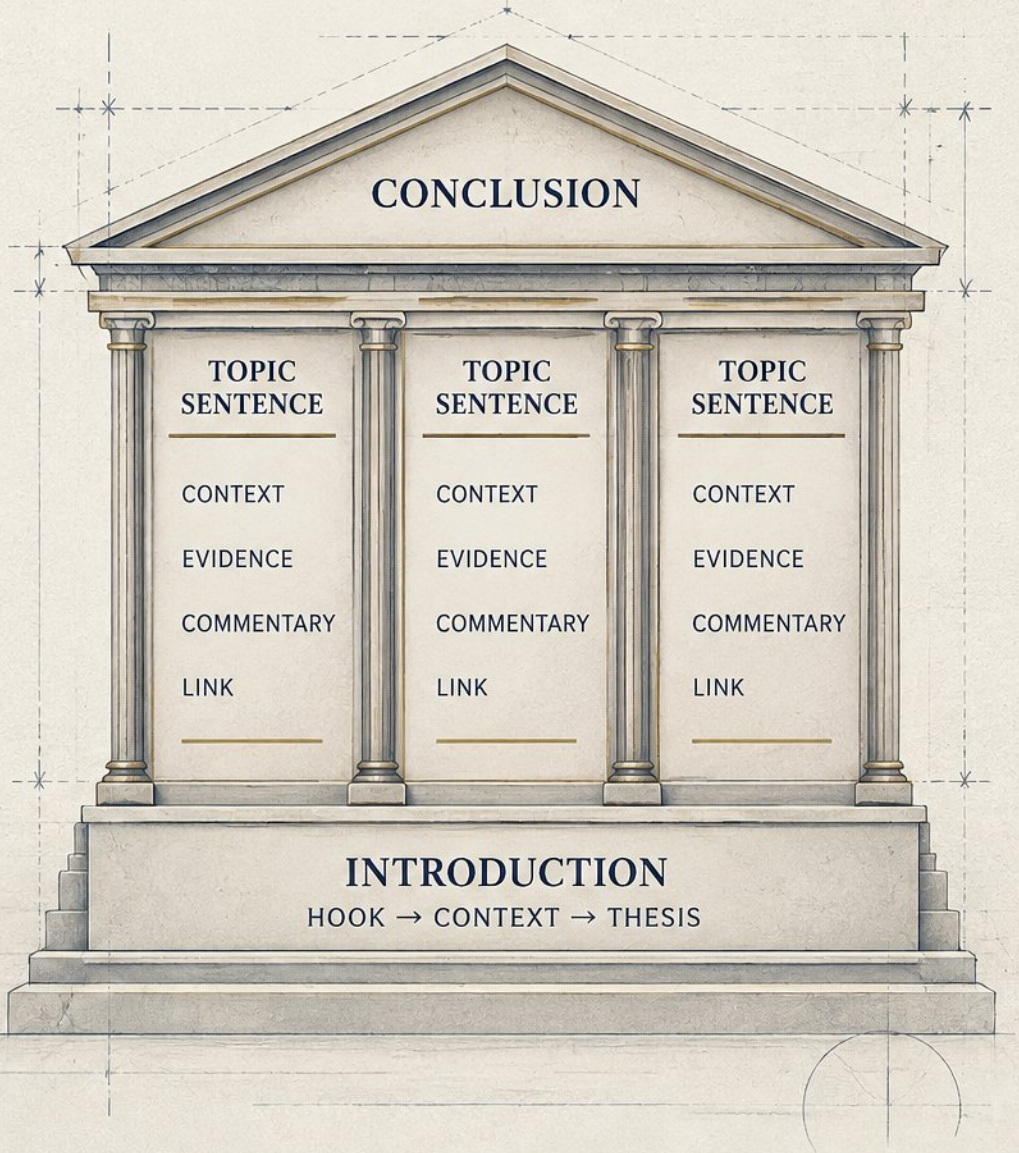


- Turn observations into a question, answer it, then reverse it into a thesis (Purdue OWL)
- Strong thesis traits: specific, contestable, text-grounded, worth debating — avoid the obvious (UNC)
- Naming a theme (love, death, betrayal) is not an argument (Toronto)
- Use active verbs: reveals, examines, subverts, complicates, portrays
- Pitfalls: too broad, too obvious, purely evaluative, or a list without significance
- Draft a working thesis early; revise as evidence accumulates

Structuring the Argument:
Paragraphs, Transitions, and Outlines

IDEAS
STRUCTURE
PERSUASION

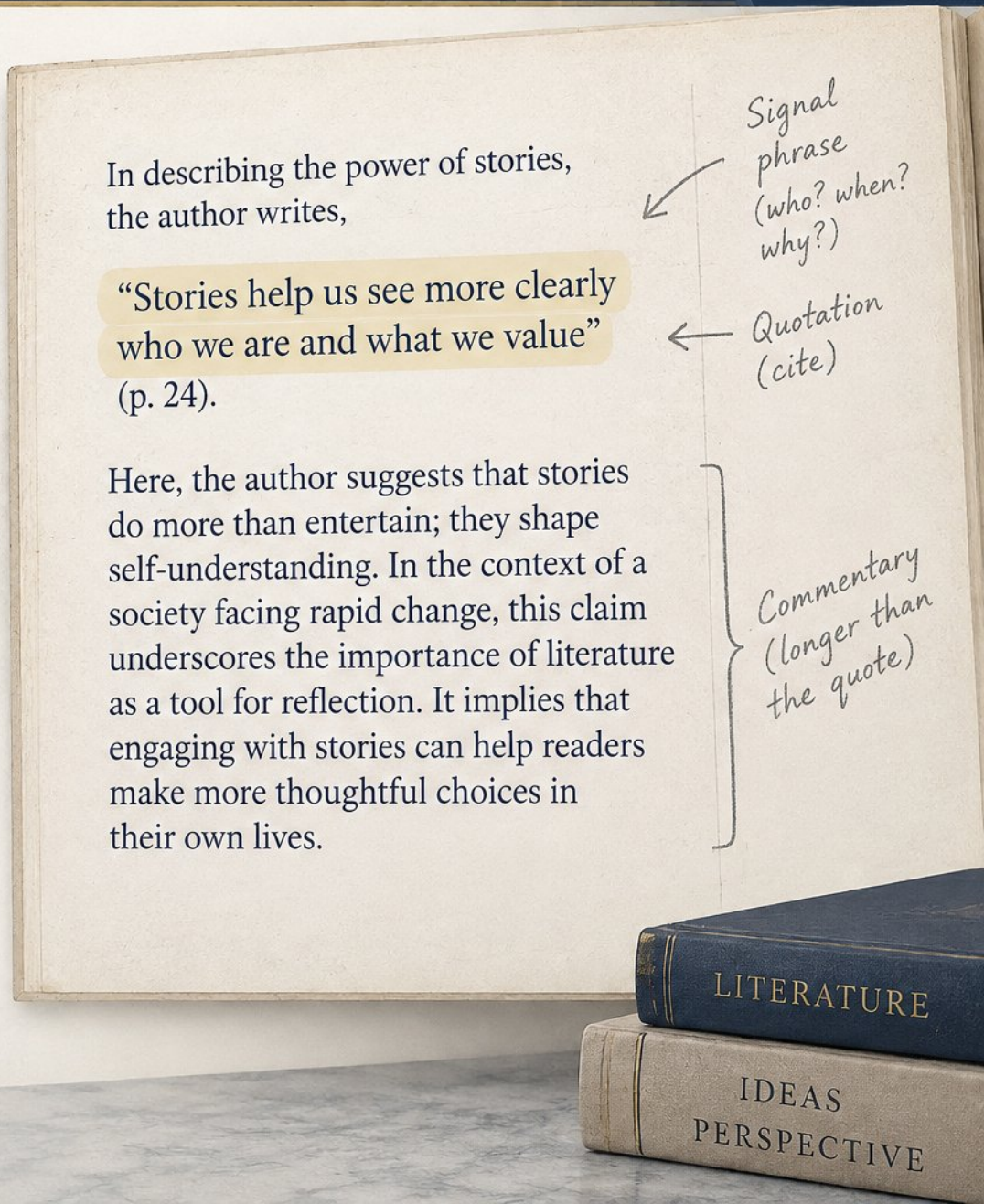
- Standard architecture: hook → context → thesis; then body; then conclusion
- Topic sentences act as mini-theses and signposts linking paragraph to thesis
- Body paragraph logic: topic sentence → context → evidence → commentary → link
- Transitions carry readers between ideas; they should not merely list points
- Outline before drafting, then reverse-outline to audit every section
- Alternatives: chronological, thematic, motif-tracking, and comparative structures



Using Textual Evidence: Quote, Paraphrase, and Cite

READ
THINK
ARGUE
WRITE

- Choose quotation, paraphrase, or reference; quote only when language matters
- Frame quotations with signal phrases: who speaks, when, and why it matters
- Analyze in three levels: restate meaning → link context → draw implications
- Keep commentary at least as long as the quotation itself
- Avoid dropped quotations, over-quoting, and plot re-telling
- MLA: short quotes in double quotation marks; block quotes indented half an inch

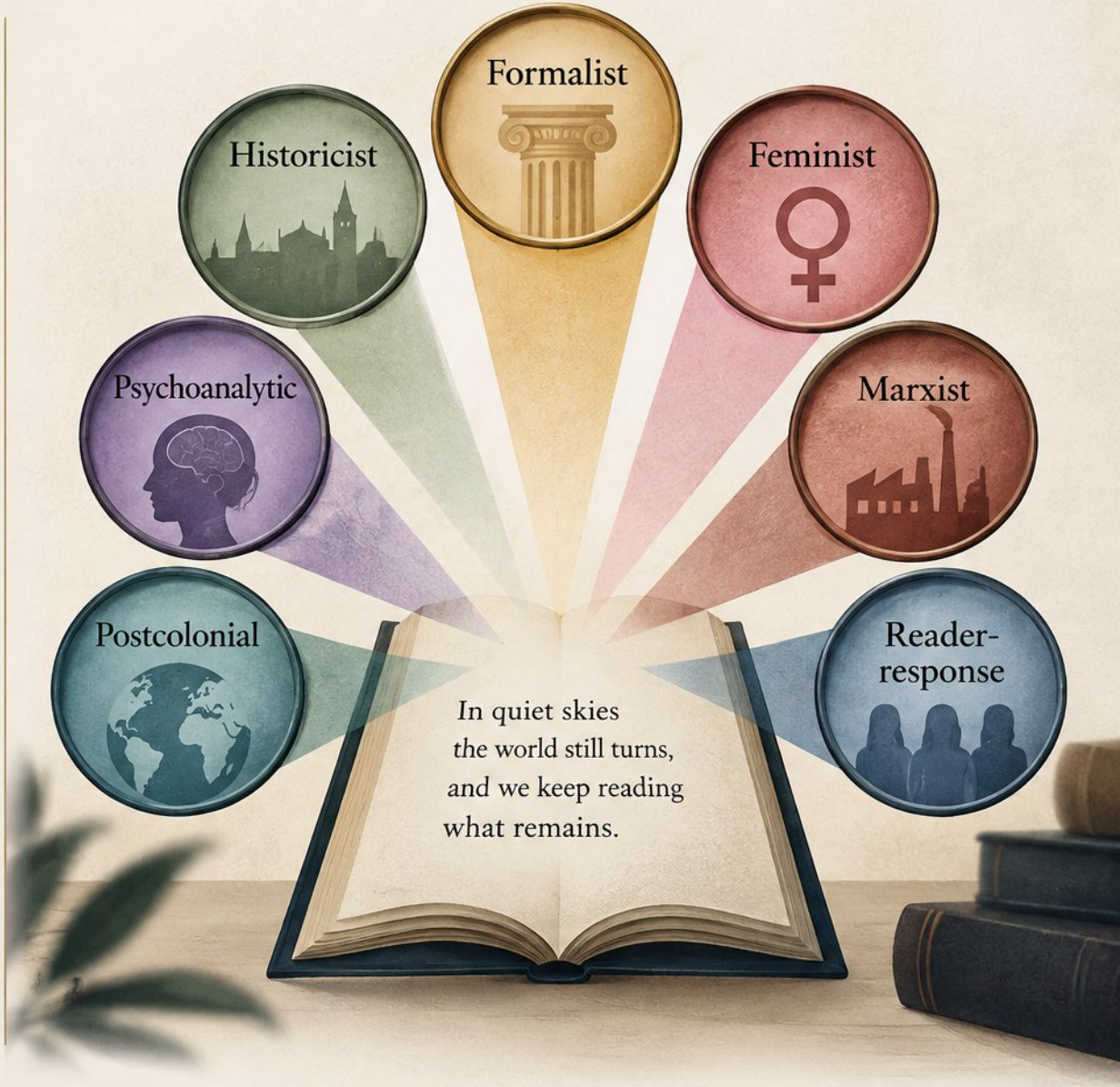


LITERATURE
IDEAS
PERSPECTIVE
DIALOGUE

Critical Lenses and Scholarly Sources

READ
THINK
QUESTION
GROW

- Major lenses: formalist, historicist, feminist, psychoanalytic, Marxist, postcolonial, reader-response
- Each lens asks different questions: form creates meaning vs. context shapes it
- Secondary sources strengthen your reading — they never replace it
- Find scholarship via library catalogs and JSTOR; evaluate author, venue, relevance
- Converse with critics: position your reading against theirs
- Cite all borrowed ideas and language in MLA 9th edition



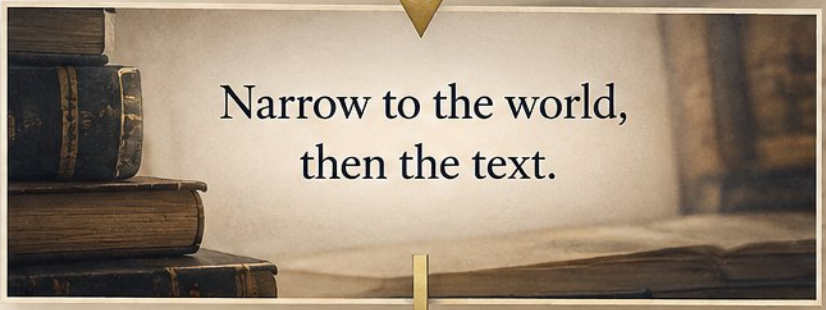
CLOSE READING . CRITICAL THINKING . STRONGER WRITING

MORE QUESTIONS. DEEPER UNDERSTANDING.

Crafting Introductions That Set Up the Argument

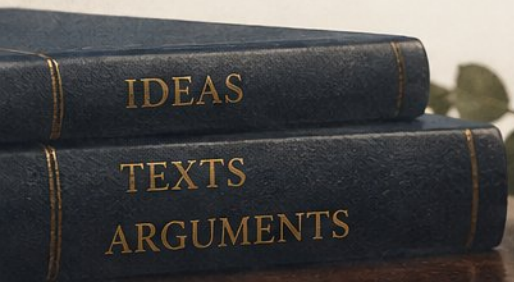
- Open with an interpretive sentence, not "Throughout history..."
- Move from big idea to world, then text, then claim
- Give only needed context: full title, author, brief background
- Place the thesis at the end of the introduction
- Italicize novels and plays; quote short stories and poems
- Replace clichéd hooks with a question, observation, or comparison





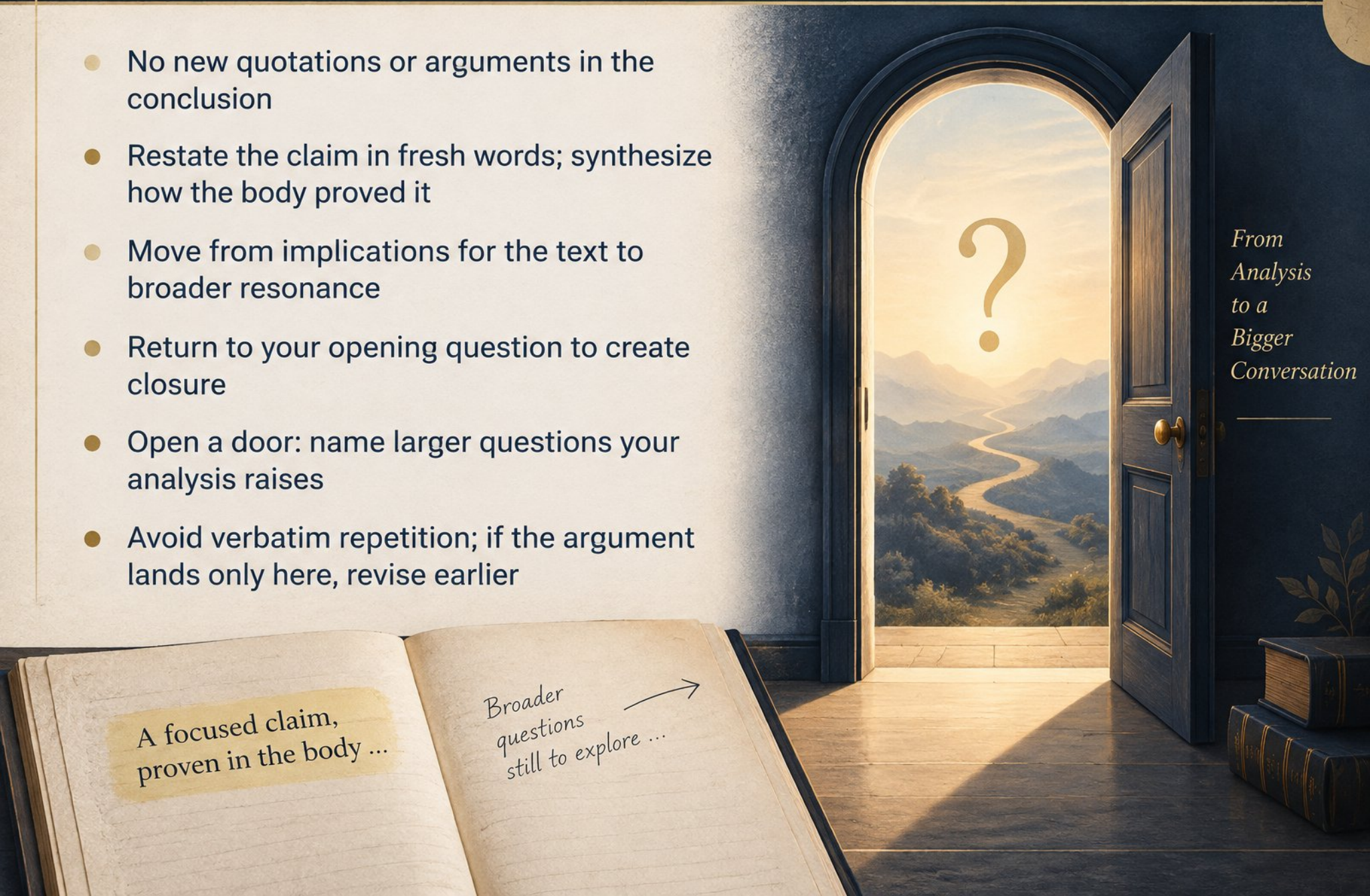


Thesis



Conclusions That Extend Significance

- No new quotations or arguments in the conclusion
- Restate the claim in fresh words; synthesize how the body proved it
- Move from implications for the text to broader resonance
- Return to your opening question to create closure
- Open a door: name larger questions your analysis raises
- Avoid verbatim repetition; if the argument lands only here, revise earlier



Revision, Style, and Responsible AI Use

Stronger clearer more focused

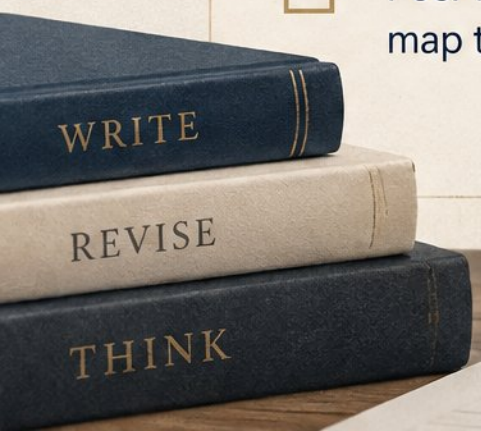
REVISION & STYLE

- [ ] Revise globally first: thesis, evidence, structure—then line edit
- [ ] Self-review checklist: does each paragraph serve the thesis?
- [ ] Style: precision, active voice, literary present, no vague praise
- [ ] Peer review: readers name thesis, map topic sentences, check quotes

AI USE & ACADEMIC INTEGRITY

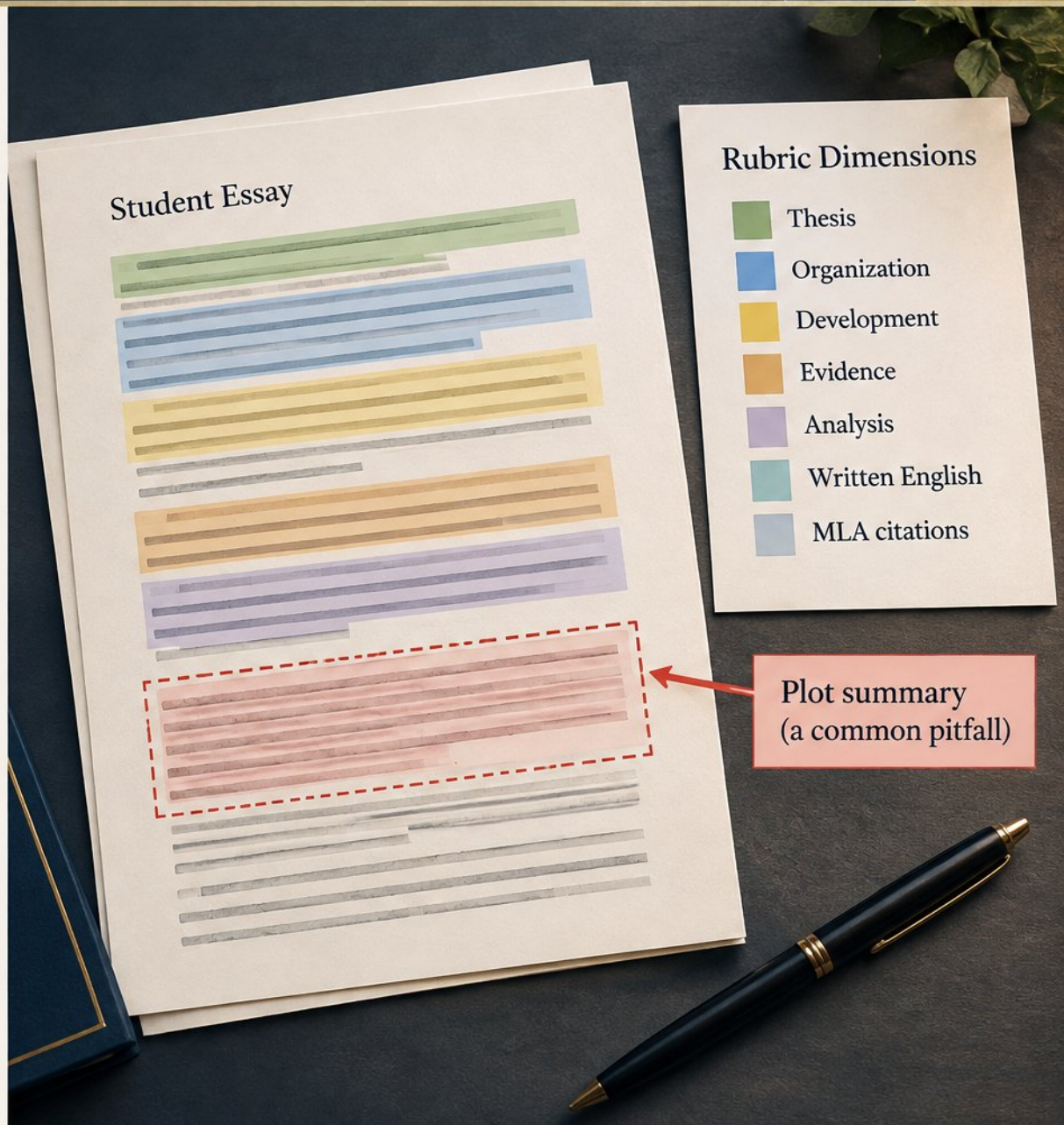
- [ ] 2026 AI policies vary by department: disclose all use, verify all output
- [ ] Undisclosed AI generation is academic misconduct; you own every idea

Use ethically
Cite your work
Own your ideas



Assessment: Rubrics, Feedback, and Common Grading Pitfalls

- Rubric dimensions: thesis, organization, development, evidence, analysis, written English, MLA citations
- Reward the arguable thesis; penalize reliance on plot summary
- AP rubrics: defensible interpretation, evidence supporting reasoning, explanation linking evidence to reasoning
- Feedback should name the interpretive move to make, not only what is wrong
- Pitfalls: rewarding summary, penalizing interpretive risk, over-weighting mechanics over argument



Classroom Application: Scaffolding, Tasks, and Next Steps

IDEAS → PRACTICE → PROGRESS

STRONGER WRITERS BRIGHTER THINKERS



- High school scaffolding: sentence templates, TIQA paragraphs, short close-reading exercises
- University deepening: comparative and theoretically informed essays with secondary sources
- Adapt the workflow for timed writing and process portfolios
- Sample tasks: annotate a passage, turn an observation into a thesis, reverse-outline a model essay
- Action plan: choose a text, build an evidence log, draft a thesis, outline, draft, revise with a checklist
- Teachers: align exercises with final rubric categories (thesis, evidence, analysis, MLA)

SAME SKILLS. HIGHER HORIZONS.

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