

[I provide this sheet in lower level literature classes and classes with mixed majors where students are developing basic argumentative skills.]

Proving Things in Literature

Proving things in literature is not like proving something in math or science. Especially in undergraduate classes where your proof will come from close reading, you're not trying to present a universal rule, or make the text fit into a general theorem. When you are making arguments in literature, **you are trying to prove something *specific* about the *particular* text you are reading.**

What counts as evidence in a literary argument is very specific – it's textual evidence, not evidence about 'what's logical' or true in the world outside the text. Your job in making literary arguments is to be persuasive *about the text*.

- Arguments in literature should be logical.
- But the logic you want to show is the text's logic – *specifically how and where this text* is doing or showing something. You want to make arguments that are logical *in* and *for* the particular text you are writing about.
- Do not argue about texts "in general." Also do not argue your opinion; your own interests will of course inform what you want to argue – but **you want to present your argument as a part of the text you are bringing to light, not your own opinion about the text.**
 - **Example:** I think Mr. X seem remote and unemotional vs. The text tells us "Mr. X had a hard time understanding his feelings" and this idea is born out in a number of his interactions with other people. The text suggests Mr. X is disconnected from his emotions and those of others.
- You should also avoid arguing based on what is logical in 'real life' or in other works – you want to make a specific claim about *this* specific work.
- The more specific your argument is, usually the more persuasive it is.
 - Grand claims are hard to defend; they open you to too many objections or exceptions.
- Evidence in literature means going to the text. That is why we are learning to close read. **Close reading is where you get your evidence.**

You can think of your job in literary argumentation as making the most persuasive case possible for your interpretation of the text.

- **"Proving" = being persuasive. In general, more detail is more persuasive.**
- "More" can mean a lot of examples, but more often it means picking a few examples and spending time explaining how they support your interpretation. If you have too many examples you won't have enough space to spend time explaining why the examples are related to your argument.

You can also think of your job as illuminating aspects of the text that your reader has not thought about, may not agree with, or which do not seem obvious. This is why you must spend time explaining your interpretation – because your reader may not see things the way you do.

Let go of the idea that “you must be right.” Remember, the text allows us to make contradictory arguments. There is no absolute “right.”

In a nutshell: make a *specific* claim, using *specific* examples *from the text* to support your claim, and *explain* how your textual evidence illustrate or supports your claim.