

# Literary Evidence Needs to be Explained

From *Grounds for Argument* ([groundsforargument.org](http://groundsforargument.org)), licensed CC BY-NC-SA 3.0

Literary evidence<sup>1</sup> is typically open to multiple interpretations. As a result, finding interesting textual evidence is only the first step in producing a compelling literary analysis. Even more important is how you persuasively analyze that evidence.

## See It In Writing and Basic Principle

Literary evidence is typically open to multiple interpretations. As a result, finding interesting textual evidence is only the first step in producing a compelling literary analysis. Even more important is how you persuasively analyze that evidence.

## In A Nutshell

Literary evidence can be interpreted in many different ways. That means that when you provide a quotation<sup>2</sup> from a text as evidence, you need to be sure to explain clearly how that evidence supports your interpretation. Although there are many ways to explain literary evidence, most people writing about literature make the following moves:

1. Introduce a quotation in a way that helps readers recognize what you want them to see in it.
2. After you quote a text, take the time to explain exactly how the language of that quotation and the form of the passage supports the point you're making.

## What to Look For

Read the following paragraph from a paper on Frost's "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening."

---

Robert Frost traditionally writes poems about an individual isolated in nature. Yet this is not always the case. For instance, in his most famous poem, "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening," he writes:

---

<sup>1</sup> Evidence: Quotations, statistics, historical accounts, expert testimony, or other external data presented in support of an argument. Evidence reflects not just your personal thinking, but what you and your readers agree is true about the outside world.

<sup>2</sup> Quotation: Closely or exactly echoing a source's words when representing its ideas in your own writing.

Whose woods these are I think I know.  
His house is in the village though;  
He will not see me stopping here  
To watch his woods fill up with snow. (1-4) <

Therefore, this poem is not just about the “Snowy Woods” of the title.

---

You might think that merely quoting from the text means you are presenting evidence to support your argument<sup>3</sup>. However, quotations from the text only count as evidence if they are framed within the context of your argument and linked to your claim<sup>4</sup>. Quotations are never self-explanatory. You always have to interpret their place in your argument. Here are three strategies for productively presenting and interpreting evidence:

1. You can present a common reading of the text and complicate and/or disagree with it.
2. You can address ideas discussed in class, and push them further or complicate their assumptions.
3. You can bring in outside evidence from scholarly resources that back up a more daring interpretation of the text.

Let’s start with option 1 above—present a common reading of the text and complicate and/or disagree with it—and see how it could be used to make a more convincing and compelling point. Your class has thoroughly discussed the issue of the isolation of the individual in nature as seen in Frost’s poem and so you want to push against this interpretation a little.

---

Robert Frost traditionally writes poems about an individual isolated in nature. Yet in spite of this recurring theme, many of Frost’s poems actually focus on the kinds of social engagements that individuals have with one another.<sup>5</sup> This is the case in Frost’s most famous poem, “Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening”. In this poem’s opening stanza, Frost’s speaker seems more concerned with the owner of these woods than he is with the woods themselves:<sup>6</sup>

Whose woods these are I think I know.  
His house is in the village though;

---

<sup>3</sup> Argument: A structured attempt to convince readers to change their actions or beliefs. Academic arguments should be well reasoned, take into account alternative viewpoints, and be built on evidence readers will accept.

<sup>4</sup> Claim: Part of an argument that tells readers what they should do or think.

<sup>5</sup> Here, the Author states her claim.

<sup>6</sup> This sentence gives an accurate account of the stanza while foregrounding the writer’s concerns for his readers.

He will not see me stopping here  
To watch his woods fill up with snow. (1-4)

As the opening words announce, this stanza focuses primarily on the question of “whose woods” these are.<sup>7</sup> While the speaker is ostensibly alone in a natural setting, he frames this piece of nature as belonging to some owner, much like “his house” located in the village.<sup>8</sup> Therefore, the speaker must reassure himself that this unnamed owner “will not see me” trespassing on his land.<sup>9</sup> At the close of this stanza, then, the reader is very much aware that the forest is not some idealized natural environment; it is very much “his woods”—that is, the private property of someone else.<sup>10</sup> Therefore, this poem is not just about the “Snowy Woods” of the title. It is openly about someone trespassing on private property and thus transgressing social boundaries.

---

A good portion—but not all—of this stanza deals with questions of ownership and property. As the writer shows, according to her interpretation the narrator seems primarily concerned with “whose woods these are.” This owner, according to the writer, becomes a character<sup>11</sup> in the poem even if “he” is absent. As you can see, the writer needs to explain these ideas explicitly, so that her readers can see how she draws her conclusions about this quotation.

When reading, though, you might have disagreed with this interpretation. Maybe the poem seems to be about feelings of censorship or idleness versus productivity. If that were the case, that’s okay: so long as the writer has done an effective job explaining why she thinks the words she quotes support her claim, then her interpretation remains plausible.

This reading is only one way to approach the passage. Here are some additional examples of ways to use these strategies as interpretive frameworks for “Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening”:

---

A) Frost often writes about the ways that nature threatens the individual. The threat, though, often arises from anxieties about surveillance and social ties—

---

<sup>7</sup> The question of “whose woods these are” is a question of property and ownership.

<sup>8</sup> Here, the writer continues to discuss how the second line of the stanza continues the theme of belonging and ownership established in the first line.

<sup>9</sup> The writer shows how, by the third line, it is worth noting how much attention is being paid to the owner of these woods (that is, “he”).

<sup>10</sup> The student closes her analysis by explaining how Frost reiterates that the woods are “his”—that is, they are owned by another.

<sup>11</sup> Anything expressible as a noun that performs an action or upon which an action is performed. See “abstract,” “imageable.”

two aspects of modern life from which nature is supposed to be a retreat—rather than the challenges of the elements. In “Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening,” the loneliness of nature supposedly protects the speaker from the prying eyes of others, and the speaker reassures himself that the owner of the land on which he is trespassing, “will not see me here.”<sup>12</sup>

B) While Frost is often described as a poet who is interested in the aesthetics of nature rather than its politics, one of his most famous poems, “Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening” addresses the changing property laws that transformed the culture and landscape of America. Morton Horwitz argues that in the early nineteenth century “the idea of property underwent a fundamental transformation—from a static agrarian conception entitling an owner to undisturbed enjoyment, to a dynamic, instrumental, and more abstract view of property that emphasized the newly paramount virtues of productive use and development” (The Transformation of American Law, 1780-1860, p. 31) The speaker of Frost’s poem endorses this more pragmatic view of property when he justifies his trespass on private property by saying, “He will not see me stopping here.” The owner’s ignorance of the violation of his property rights is not important, because the trespasser is not harming the property, and merely putting it to use.<sup>13</sup>

---

### The Basic Principle

As evidence, a passage from a poem or a novel works very differently than other kinds of data<sup>14</sup>. That’s because literary evidence is rarely treated as an absolute fact that directly proves a point. Instead, most readers see literature as requiring interpretation before it can support an argument. This means that when you write about literature, you need to explain the specific language of your evidence more thoroughly than if you’re mentioning, say, an historical event.

Look at the following passage from one of William Shakespeare’s most famous sonnets. In this quotation, the speaker writes about love:

---

Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?  
Thou art more lovely and more temperate:

---

<sup>12</sup> This passage uses strategy 2 above, complicating something that your class has discussed.

<sup>13</sup> This passage uses strategy 3 above, bringing in outside information that changes the way we see the evidence.

<sup>14</sup> Data: Sets of facts gathered together in one place for a reader. We usually think of data as numbers, but data can be any kind of information.

Rough winds do shake the darling buds of May,  
And summer's lease hath all too short a date... (Sonnets 18, ll.1-4)<

---

What kind of point does this passage prove? If you're like most readers, you'd find that question pretty confusing. In fact, you probably found these four lines difficult to understand at all. That's because we provided no explanation of this quotation—no extra writing telling you what to look out for or what these lines mean. If you introduce your evidence like this when you're writing about literature, your readers will be similarly confused.

Introduce a quotation in a way that helps readers recognize what you want them to see in it.

The first step in using this quotation as evidence is to make sure that it's proving a point you make—that the quotation is actively demonstrating something. Let's look at the same example, only now with this sort of introduction:

---

In sonnet 18, the speaker doesn't focus on how his lover is like a beautiful summer day. Instead, he clearly emphasizes the shortcomings of such a comparison:

Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?  
Thou art more lovely and more temperate:  
Rough winds do shake the darling buds of May,  
And summer's lease hath all too short a date... (Sonnets 18, ll.1-4)<

---

You probably had an easier time making sense of these four lines with just a little bit of introduction. That's because the writer of this paper also makes an assertion—a local claim or interpretation—about the passage she's quoting. That quotation makes more sense because it can now be seen as evidence of a specific interpretation.

When you offer a passage from a literary text, one good way to start is by stating the point you want to make about that quotation. That way, your readers will have a clearer sense of what that quotation is about even before they read it. Importantly, they'll also understand that quotation as evidence of an argument that you're making.

After you quote a text, explain exactly how the language of that quotation supports the point you're making.

Setting up the quotation is only the first step. By proposing an interpretation of the quotation you're about to provide, you can help readers get a sense of what it means when they read it.

This by itself though isn't enough: you'll also need to explain exactly what it is about your evidence that supports your local claim.

Let's look at the above example, only with a full explanation of the quotation afterwards:

---

In sonnet 18, the speaker doesn't focus on how his lover is like a beautiful summer day. Instead, he clearly emphasizes the shortcomings of such a comparison:

Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?  
Thou art more lovely and more temperate:  
Rough winds do shake the darling buds of May,  
And summer's lease hath all too short a date... (Sonnets 18, ll.1-4)

Here the speaker proposes a comparison between his addressee and a summer day—only he does so in the form of a question: “Shall I” make this comparison, he asks? The use of the question, rather than an assertion, becomes significant because the question form allows for doubt. As one reads further, it becomes clear that he should not have done so, because this comparison does not do justice to his beloved. That beloved, Shakespeare notes, is “more lovely and more temperate” than a summer's day, making the conceit a false one. He returns to this idea in the fourth line, where he explains that summer's “lease”—that is, its length—has “too short a date.” Unlike the beauty of his addressee, summer's loveliness is impermanent. Shakespeare only compares his beloved to the summer in order to reject that comparison as false, imperfect, and unworthy of the person to whom he speaks.

---

While the introductory sentences provide a useful context for reading and understanding this quotation, the quotation alone doesn't fully support the writer's interpretation of it. Indeed, you can see how complicated it is to show that opening assertion by looking at the explanation that follows the quotation. That explanation goes through the quotation line by line explaining how its specific words and phrases make the point that this writer is trying to make.

This writer has to focus on specific parts of the quotation at hand—note, for example, how it emphasizes parts of lines 1, 2, and 4, but leaves line 3 alone. That's because line 3 simply illustrates a point already raised. While it might be crucial evidence for a different interpretation (one that focuses, say, on nature imagery), it doesn't add much to this writer's argument. When you go to explain evidence, you have to be similarly selective in order to help your reader focus on the specific words and phrases that matter to your argument.

Close reading is a good safeguard against misinterpretation: if you're really paying attention to the words, form, and figurative language used in a passage, then you won't make the mistake of trying to force a literary work to say something that it is not saying. Close readings can also make your larger argument more complex: they allow you to spot parts of the text where a pattern is broken, or even to find evidence that contradicts your claim so that you can think more comprehensively and fully about what you think the text is doing.

Literature, as you can see, requires careful attention to detail—otherwise it might not make much sense at all. When you're writing about literature, then, you'll need to be ready not just to find evidence that supports your larger argument. You'll also need to interpret that evidence for your reader, and explain how its details support your interpretation.

## Try It: Literary Evidence Needs to Be Explained

Now let's look at a few more examples, and try to explain how they support different kinds of interpretations or claims.

### Example 1

Read the following paragraph from a paper on Herman Melville's short story "Bartleby the Scrivener." You've been having a discussion in class about morality in the story, and for your 5-7 page paper assignment, you come up with the following claim:

---

"Bartleby the Scrivener" deliberately confuses conventional moral codes, making it difficult to divine wrong from right in the story.

---

From there, you write this first draft of a close reading of a passage from the story:

---

Melville sets his narrative in a world without any clear sense of justice. He emphasizes this in the opening pages of the work, when the narrator describes his profession:

I am a man who, from his youth upwards, has been filled with a profound conviction that the easiest way of life is the best. ... I am one of those unambitious lawyers who never addresses a jury, or in any way draws down public applause; but in the cool tranquillity of a snug retreat, do a snug business among rich men's bonds and mortgages and title-deeds. All who know me consider me an eminently safe man.

Although the story’s narrator is a lawyer, he does not therefore think in terms of right and wrong or justice and injustice—and his perspective will of course dominate the story that follows.

---

### Step 1: Introduce the quotation

Which sentence accurately summarizes the passage while introducing the evidence in a way that supports the writer’s interpretation?

1. In fact, the story’s narrator seems to reject the very idea of right and wrong, preferring to extract as much money as possible from his wealthy clients.<sup>15</sup>
2. In fact, the story’s narrator seems indifferent to matters of justice, and even seems to confuse what is right with what is safe and comfortable.<sup>16</sup>
3. In fact, the story’s narrator does not really think in terms of right and wrong.<sup>17</sup>

### Step 2: Explain the quotation

Now that you’ve introduced this passage, you’ll need to explain it. Read the footnotes for specific phrases to see how they support the interpretation at hand.

---

Melville sets his narrative in a world without any clear sense of justice. In fact, the story’s narrator seems indifferent to matters of justice, and even seems to confuse what is right with what is safe and comfortable. He emphasizes this in the opening pages of the work, when the narrator describes his profession:

I am a man who, from his youth upwards, has been filled with a profound conviction that the easiest way of life is the best<sup>18</sup>. . . . I am one of those unambitious lawyers who never addresses a jury, or in any way draws down public applause; but in the cool tranquility of a snug retreat, do a snug

---

<sup>15</sup> Incorrect: This sentence distorts the meaning of the passage. The narrator doesn’t “reject” right and wrong so much as he ignores it, and very little in the passage suggests that the narrator attempts to make money at the expense of others.

<sup>16</sup> Correct: This sentence introduces the passage accurately and specifically, thus linking it to the larger *argument* that right and wrong is unclear in this story.

<sup>17</sup> Incorrect: This sentence is generally valid as an interpretation of the passage, but it is not specific enough to prepare readers to read the passage in a way that supports the interpretation at hand.

<sup>18</sup> This phrase is an announcement of the narrator’s key value—which, notably, is not justice.



business among rich men's bonds and mortgages and title-deeds<sup>19</sup>. All who know me consider me an eminently safe man.<sup>20</sup>

---

Right away in the story, the narrator announces his central value: that “the easiest way of life is the best.” His very occupation is based on this value. Instead of a life defending justice or seeking fame at court, he instead prefers to remain “snug” in his work, which he describes as a kind of vacation or “retreat.” His reputation is that of a “safe man” who prefers to step back from the difficult court decisions in favor of an easier path. Although the story's narrator is a lawyer, he does not therefore think in terms of right and wrong or justice and injustice—and his perspective will of course dominate the story that follows.

This paragraph now explains its evidence more clearly, tying the passage at hand to a larger claim about this short story.

Now let's look at a few more examples, and try to explain how they support different kinds of interpretations or claims.

### Example 2

In your Renaissance drama class, you've been reading one of William Shakespeare's most famous plays, *Hamlet*. For your 8-10 page paper, you decide to write about it and come up with the following first draft of a claim:

---

Throughout much of the play, Hamlet is caught in a trap of indecision caused by a refusal to deal directly with the difficulties he faces.

---

To support this claim, you find a passage and come up with this initial interpretation.

---

Throughout much of the play, Hamlet is caught in a trap of indecision caused by a refusal to deal directly with the difficulties he faces. This is the case in the work's most famous monologue:

To be, or not to be—that is the question:

Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer

---

<sup>19</sup> The repeated use of the word “snug” emphasizes how the lawyer plays it safe.

<sup>20</sup> Here the narrator reasserts his reputation as a “safe man,” rather than (say) a corrupt lawyer or advocate of justice.

The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune

Or to take arms against a sea of troubles

And by opposing them, end them.

Although Hamlet poses a debate between action and inaction, he is not speaking about what specifically he should or should not do. Because he favors an abstract philosophical problem over a practical decision, he poses a question that is impossible to answer. Hamlet chooses “not to be” almost by default.

---

### Step 1: Introduce the quotation

Which sentence accurately summarizes the passage while introducing the *evidence* in a way that supports the interpretation?

1. This is the case in the work’s most famous monologue, where Hamlet blames the confusing and unclear events around him as the main reason for failing to act.<sup>21</sup>
2. This is the case in the work’s most famous monologue, where Hamlet considers the merits of *action* and inaction.<sup>22</sup>
3. This is the case in the work’s most famous monologue, where Hamlet treats *action* and inaction as an *abstract* question to be pondered, rather than a practical decision to be made.<sup>23</sup>

### Step 2: Explain the quotation

Now that you’ve introduced this passage, you’ll need to explain it. Read the footnotes for specific phrases to see how they support the interpretation at hand.

Throughout much of the play, Hamlet is caught in a trap of indecision caused by a refusal to deal directly with the difficulties he faces. This is the case in the work’s most famous

---

<sup>21</sup> This sentence does not accurately describe the quotation. Hamlet does not actually “blame” anything or anyone for his failure to decide or act

<sup>22</sup> This is an accurate summary of the quotation, but it does little to explain how that quotation supports the paragraph’s larger claim.

<sup>23</sup> Correct. This sentence accurately introduces the quotation while explaining what readers should notice about this quotation as they read it.

monologue, where Hamlet treats action and inaction as an abstract question to be pondered, rather than practical decision to be made:

---

To be, or not to be—that is the question.<sup>24</sup>

Whether 'tis nobler in the mind<sup>25</sup> to suffer

The slings and arrows<sup>26</sup> of outrageous fortune

Or to take arms against a sea of troubles<sup>27</sup>

And by opposing them, end them.

---

Hamlet begins by considering an extremely broad “question”: what it means to exist or not exist. Yet this is not a question that allows for any practical resolution<sup>28</sup> or action, and Hamlet even admits that it is something to be pondered only “in the mind.” For this reason, the hero does not consider the events of the world around him, but ponders over the indeterminate of “outrageous fortune” and the vague “a sea of troubles” that one must face. Although Hamlet poses a debate between action and inaction, he is not speaking about what specifically he should or should not do. Because he favors an abstract philosophical problem over a practical decision, he poses a question that is impossible to answer. Hamlet chooses “not to be” almost by default.

### Example 3

It is important to remember that the same evidence could elicit different explanations and evidence different claims. Let’s look at an example from another paper that uses the same passage but wants to argue instead that Hamlet often simplifies the terms of his argument in order to make it seem like his actions are defensible, necessary, and logical. Read the sample below and then answer the questions that follow to revise the paragraph so that it evidences its interpretation more clearly.

---

<sup>24</sup> Hamlet is here considering a “question,” rather than a decision. The question posed here is as abstract as any question could be, and has very little to do with any practical decisions Hamlet might make.

<sup>25</sup> Here Hamlet emphasizes that he is considering a problem “in his mind” rather than a set of real-life events.

<sup>26</sup> This phrase does not suggest that Hamlet focuses on an abstract problem instead of making a practical decision.

<sup>27</sup> Here Hamlet is considering what it means to endure a generalized “fortune,” rather than explain the specific obstacles he must face.

<sup>28</sup> Resolution: A solution to a problem that replaces, expands, or strengthens the status quo in a way that better accounts for the destabilizing condition. See “Claim.”

---

Hamlet’s internal debates are increasingly reductive throughout the play, and he often sees everything around him in terms that are far more simplistic than the reality of the play suggests. This much is clear in the work’s most famous passage:

To be, or not to be—that is the question:

Whether ’tis nobler in the mind to suffer

The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune

Or to take arms against a sea of troubles

And by opposing them, end them.

To Hamlet, a person’s very being is likened to his or her conduct in war. Action, inaction, and even existence itself are reduced to enduring or causing harm—a perspective that drastically oversimplifies the complexity of the play’s plot and characters.

---

### Step 1: Introduce the quotation

Which sentence accurately summarizes the passage while introducing the *evidence* in a way that supports the writer’s interpretation?

1. This much is clear in the work’s most famous passage, which reduces existence to how one handles oneself in a martial setting.<sup>29</sup>
2. This much is clear in the work’s most famous passage, which weighs the *costs* and *benefits* of joining the military.<sup>30</sup>
3. This much is clear in the work’s most famous passage, which considers the question of existence and being.<sup>31</sup>

### Step 2: Explain the quotation

---

<sup>29</sup> Correct. This sentence links the writer’s broader claim (that Hamlet’s thinking is limited and reductive) to a specific instance.

<sup>30</sup> Incorrect. This sentence misrepresents the passage at hand, which is not about joining the military.

<sup>31</sup> Incorrect. This sentence accurately describes the passage that follows, but does not explain how the passage will support the interpretation this writer raises.

Now that you've introduced this passage, you'll need to explain it. Read the footnotes for specific phrases to see how they support the interpretation at hand.

Hamlet's internal debates are increasingly reductive throughout the play, and he often sees everything around him in terms that are far more simplistic than the reality of the play suggests. This much is clear in the work's most famous passage, which reduces existence to how one handles oneself in a martial setting:

---

(To be, or not to be—that is the question:).<sup>32</sup>

Whether 'tis nobler in the mind<sup>33</sup> to suffer

The slings and arrows<sup>34</sup> of outrageous fortune

Or to take arms<sup>35</sup> against a sea of troubles

And by opposing them, end them.<sup>36</sup>

---

Importantly, this evidence can support this interpretation as well as the one before it—and perhaps still more interpretations. This is why it is so important to explain your literary evidence as clearly as possible.

The main question here is the endlessly complex question of a person's existence, or what it means "to be, or not to be." To grapple with this question, Hamlet compares being and nonbeing as a person's military bearing; existence hinges on whether one can endure "slings and arrows" or whether one will "take up arms." Ultimately, these large questions of *action* and being seem to take form as a military move; one exists if one is willing to "oppose" fortune and "end" (or kill) it. To Hamlet, a person's very being is likened to his or her conduct in war. Action, inaction, and even existence itself are reduced to enduring or causing harm—a perspective that drastically oversimplifies the complexity of the play's plot and characters.

---

<sup>32</sup> Hamlet is here considering the essential question of what it means to exist—that is "to be, or not to be."

<sup>33</sup> This phrase does not suggest that Hamlet reduces the question of existence to military action (or inaction).

<sup>34</sup> Here inaction is framed as enduring the weapons and attacks of fortune.

<sup>35</sup> Here action is defined as taking up weapons and armor and doing battle with one's troubles.

<sup>36</sup> Again, action and being are defined as opposition and ending—in this context ending by killing.