Preparing for and Taking Exams in Literature

Literature courses concentrate on the analysis, subjective evaluation, and interpretation of ideas expressed. They, therefore, require critical reading. It is necessary to establish literal meaning first, then to work on interpretation. As you read or review, look for the answers to:

- **Who?** Identify the subject.
- **What is happening?** Describe the basic plot or sequence of events.
- **When/Where?** Establish the scene, setting, or context.
- **Why?** Why did the author write this?
- **Message?** What is the message the author is conveying and what is its' significance?

Annotate as you read:

Jot down reactions, hunches, insights, feelings, and questions.

Identify themes and patterns:

Themes are questions or problems raised by the story: They can be moral, political, philosophical, or religious.

- Abstract ideas: love, death, heroism, escapism, honor.
- Conflicts: appearance versus restraint, poverty versus wealth.
- Common literary topics: self-realization, inescapability of death, fall from innocence, search for the meaning of life.

Analyze character development:

- How were character or characters portrayed?
- Does the character change?
- What influence does the character have?

Identify literary devices: symbolism, irony, satire, and interior dialogue.
Summary of Essay Test-Taking Strategies

1. **Be prepared with necessary supplies** (paper or blue book, if required). Have two pens in case one runs dry. Do not write in pencil because it smudges and looks messy.

2. **Read directions carefully.** Know how many questions you are required to answer. Do not waste time answering more than required.

3. **Survey the whole test** quickly to decide which questions you would like to answer and discover topics included in test.

4. **Budget your time**, based on the point value of the questions. There is no advantage to finishing early. Use all the allotted time.

5. **Know what different types of questions require for the answer.** (See Study Skills Handout #11-4, pages 2 and 3 more information.)

6. **Organize your answer.** Spend a few minutes thinking through your answer. Jot down a brief outline of your thoughts. Organize your ideas carefully in the most logical order. Remember the basics of good paragraph writing.

7. **Be concise, but specific.** Do not attempt to pad your answer. Be sure to support main points with specific references and examples.

8. **Be neat.** Make sure your paper looks inviting to read. If you must make corrections, cross out with a single line.

9. **Proofread your answers.** Check for spelling, grammar, punctuation, and logical organization.

10. **If you do not do as well as you anticipated or would like, be sure to see your instructor.** Make the test a learning experience so that you will know what to do differently the next time.

Adapted from: *“Achieving Academic Success”* by Elaine Cherny, et al.  
*“Academic Reading”* by Kathleen T. McWhorter  
*“Study for Success”* by Meredith D. Gall