

AVOIDING PLOT SUMMARY IN A LITERATURE ESSAY

A frequent criticism you may receive on marked literature essays is that you have done too much “telling of the story”--in other words, rephrasing, paraphrasing or summarizing of the work’s contents. If you have been told, “Don’t tell me what happened; show me why it is important,” you may wonder how to do the latter without having done the former. And if you have been told, “Assume your reader has read the work,” you may wonder how you can possibly discuss a work without referring to specific statements or events within it. The following points should help you to distinguish between unnecessary plot summary and necessary analysis.

1. Distinguish accepted facts about the work from interpretations of it. If all readers would agree about the plot events of a work, you need not remind your reader of those events; you should assume that he or she has read the piece and knows what happens and when. However, if the facts of the work are unclear or not universally accepted (for example, if an event in a novel may be a real occurrence or a dream; or if it is not obvious whether the speaker in a poem is a man or a woman), you may need to describe what you think is going on. This is not plot summary, but is a means of establishing your personal interpretation of something in the work.
2. Descriptions of plot events should be used to support a specific argumentative point. Suppose you were talking to a friend about a recent episode of a favourite TV show, and you said, “That was a great episode: John thought Sue was cheating on him so he tried to make her jealous by pretending to cheat on her, and it backfired.” Your friend might say, “But I saw all that myself; what about it?”--rightly objecting to your simply telling the story with no apparent point. But suppose you were to say, “John’s character is becoming more manipulative; his comment to Sue about his supposed ‘hot date’ with Mary seemed more devious than usual.” In this case, you would be using a particular plot event to support your opinion about the show; in order to convince your friend, you must point to an example with which he or she is familiar.

The same is true for a literature essay: any plot description or summary of contents must support a point--not substitute for one. You should ask yourself the question your marker is sure to ask: “Why is this important?” In other words, what is the significance of this element of the work in relation to the point you wish to make?

The following two paragraphs discuss with equal accuracy and intelligence the same passage from Shakespeare’s *1 Henry IV*. Only one of these, however, would be considered acceptable in a university English essay. The other is merely a well-written plot summary and contributes virtually nothing to our understanding of the significance of the episode.

- A. In the first scene, King Henry compares his own son unfavourably with Northumberland’s warrior son Hotspur. He says that Hotspur is “the theme of honour’s tongue” whereas the wastrel Hal is stained by “riot and dishonour.” The King wistfully wishes that some fairy had exchanged the two in infancy so that he (and the nation) might now have a more suitable prince. Henry then asks his counsellors the meaning of Hotspur’s withholding from the crown a number of Scottish prisoners recently taken in battle. Westmoreland replies that this apparent disloyalty is not the fault of Hotspur but of his malevolent uncle, Worcester, who has induced Hotspur to “prune himself” and “bristle up/The crest of youth against your dignity.”
- B. King Henry’s unfavourable comparison of Hal’s “riot and dishonour” with the heroic virtues of Hotspur (“the theme of honour’s tongue”) effectively introduces and interests us in the two main characters, even though they have not yet appeared on stage. It also establishes from the very outset the conflict between the King and his son and sets up an important structural feature of the play, the juxtaposed careers of Hal and Hotspur. We are, furthermore, alerted at once to the play’s persistent preoccupation with the theme of “honour.” In this passage, then, Shakespeare has two different young men “bristle up/The crest of youth” against the “dignity” of the King and thus sets in motion at one stroke several of the central dramatic elements of this work.