College-Level Writing

Directions: Want to write college-level literary/rhetorical analysis essays? Take these five tips to heart. (Note: many of these tips apply to discussion and informal writing, as well!)

1. Be organized, but not formulaic.
   - **Intro paragraph:** relevant hook, plot summary, thesis, roadmap of main ideas to come in the body paragraphs. For timed essays, a hook and thesis are usually enough.
   - **Body paragraphs:** Topic sentence, average of three pieces of evidence from the text per paragraph. Should be a ratio of 25% quoted material, 70% analysis, and 5% other. Do NOT use tired, old transitions (“this shows that”). In general, quotes should be
   - **Conclusion paragraph** – leave the reader with something profound to think about.

2. Be insightful.
   - Take risks. Say something in your analysis that *might be wrong* or someone might disagree with. Say something about the text that maybe nobody has ever thought of before.
   - Back up your risks with evidence from the text.
   - Analyze closely. That means instead of analyzing broad passages as a whole, analyze one particular sentence. Or one word. Or one particular literary/rhetorical device used by the author.
   - Use the correct literary/rhetorical terminology, if appropriate.

3. Be expansive.
   Don’t just spit out a good idea and then move quickly on. Talk about the idea. Explain it in as much detail as you can. Explore it. Back it up. Show your curiosity. Make connections to other ideas. Make connections to other authors or works of literature. Slow down and *savor* the idea as much as possible.

   For a take-home essay, do not just quote from the book you have been assigned. Go out and do some research. Use quotes from other works by the author, or use quotes from literary critics who have written about the author.

4. Be author-centered.
   Remember that any analysis of a book is *really* an analysis of an author. Unsophisticated writers focus on plot and characters. More sophisticated writers focus on the author.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Don't write:</th>
<th>Do write:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>That part of the book was exciting because…</td>
<td>In this section the author creates suspense by…</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I really like character X.</td>
<td>Character X is a compelling character because</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>the author…</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Character X should have…</td>
<td>The author chooses a peculiar route for</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Character X…</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

5. Be correct.
   - If you are not good at spelling, grammar, capitalization, punctuation and citations, find somebody who is good at those things to edit your paper. Better yet, find three somebodies. (This is, of course, assuming it’s a take-home essay.)
   - When possible, write many drafts. Keep editing/revising and producing new drafts.