

**A step-by-step guideline for writing letter essays about fiction – revised**  
**Letter Essay = Response to a Book (not a summary!)**

- Write it on Monday...
- Read it over (& make changes) on Tuesday...
- Print it out and read it ALOUD on Wednesday...
- Make final edits on Thursday...Print & glue into log.

**Paragraph One:** After your greeting, provide the author, title, and genre of the book. Include a brief summary of the plot – the Who, What, Where, When, and Why of the book. Summary should never be more than ¼ of your total essay.

**Paragraph Two:** Discuss the book’s theme. The theme is the author’s message. It’s **not** a condensed summary of the plot. It’s a generalization about people or about life. For example, in *The Hunger Games*, Nature Academy students identified the following themes: “Tyranny always leads to rebellion” “If it’s wrong, do all you can to fix it” “When a person is kind to others, the kindness will come back to him”

After you identify a theme, explain what plot events support it.

For more help, see the “Understanding Theme” page below.

**Paragraph Three/Four:** Offer interpretations of the text. An interpretation is an observation you make about the characters, plot, or structure of the book that isn’t directly stated by the author. For example, you can interpret that Katniss, the main character from *The Hunger Games*, is a kind and brave person because she helps another despite great personal risk even though the author never states that directly in the novel. For ideas on formulating interpretations, see the “sentence openers” glued to the inside back cover of your lit. log. As always, support your thoughts with examples, preferably in the form of quoted passages, from the text.

**Paragraph Four/Five:** Comment on the writing. Look back over the book and comment on word choice, cliffhanger chapter endings, chapter titles, illustrations, use of dialogue, action sequences, descriptive language... Be sure to **quote sentences** or particular word choices that you find especially compelling or disappointing. Explain your opinions in detail.

**Paragraph Five/Six:** Evaluate. What is good/bad about the book? Is it appropriate for middle-school readers in terms of vocabulary, subject matter, pacing? How does it compare with similar books you have read, movies you have watched, or real-life events you have observed or experienced? If there is a part you would change, add more to, or omit, please share your opinions! As always, support your views with specific examples – preferably with passages quoted from the text.

**Conclusion:** Encourage me to purchase, retain, or ban the book from the classroom library.

**Reminder:** You must include one or more copied chunks of text (passages quoted from the book) plus explanations of why you chose those passages in every letter-essay!

**Historical Fiction Help:** See “History Book Help Facts” below.

## **Understanding Theme in a literary work**

A THEME is the main idea or underlying meaning of a literary work. A theme may be stated or implied.

It is important to recognize the difference between the theme of a literary work and the subject of a literary work. The subject is the topic on which an author has chosen to write. The theme, however, makes some statement about or expresses some opinion on that topic. For example, the subject of a story might be war while the theme might be the idea that war is useless.

Four ways in which an author can express themes are as follows:

1. Themes are expressed and emphasized by the way the author makes us feel. By sharing feelings of the main character you also share the ideas that go through his mind.
2. Themes are presented in thoughts and conversations. Authors put words in their character's mouths only for good reasons. One of these is to develop a story's themes. The things a person says are much on their mind. Look for thoughts that are repeated throughout the story.
3. Themes are suggested through the characters. The main character usually illustrates the most important theme of the story. A good way to get at this theme is to ask the question, "What does the main character learn in the course of the story?"
4. The actions or events in the story are used to suggest theme. People naturally express ideas and feelings through their actions. One thing authors think about is what an action will "say". In other words, how will the action express an idea or theme?

The preceding is excerpted from the Literary Terms Page of the Yorba Middle School website.

## History Book Facts Help

As you know, each trimester you must read at least one history book and one science-oriented book.

When writing letter-essay about a history book, you need to include at least ten facts within or directly after your letter-essay.

The following list should help you identify facts... even from historical fiction!

What does your book reveal about:

- foods** – what people eat, how it is prepared, how plentiful it is
- transportation** – how people travel from place to place
- clothing** – how people dress on a daily basis or on celebration days
- religion**- how people worship; what religion they follow; amount of time spent on religion daily/weekly/monthly...
- work**- what people do to survive (hunter/gatherer, soldier, farmer, childcare provider, wife, clergyman, ruler...)
- education** – how people are educated. Does everyone have equal access to education or is it limited to a specific social class (rich, poor, in the middle) or gender (male/female)
- crime and punishment** – how wrongdoers are dealt with in this society. Is there a specific person or group responsible for punishing others? Do the punishments seem moderate or severe? Is there any person or group “above the law”?
- war and peace** – how war affected the lives of people. What caused this culture to go into battle or participate in war?
- the arts** – how the arts (music, dance, visual arts like painting and drawing...) are incorporated into people’s lives.
- leisure time**- how non-working hours (if any) are spent. Please note that a lack of leisure time is a fact in itself!
- gender issues** – how men and women are treated - how is it different from our society?
- age issues** – how children and the old are treated in this society. At what age does one transition from childhood to being an adult?
- science** – how are people involved with biology, chemistry, physics, astronomy...
- health and medicine** – what sort of illnesses and medicines were available at the time? How did illness and medicine impact society...