Evidence & authority

Close reading and composition · Grades 10–12

The teaching sequence

Suggested pacing: twelve weeks. Read, discuss and annotate before assessing. Each work has five short answers and an essay of at least 650 words.

Weeks 1–2 · Witnesses

Gilman: annotate both accounts of illness and revisit them after the ending. Glaspell: stage the same scene twice, changing sight lines. Track who sees each object.

Weeks 3–6 · Disclosure

Stevenson: log each clue in disclosure order and reconsider it after the two doctors speak. Dickens: compare price and value across the visits. Revisit Scrooge’s early definitions of business.

Weeks 7–12 · The narrator’s authority

Forster: trace one body and one message through the Machine. Fitzgerald: map what Nick witnesses and what others tell him. Workshop and revise the collected essays.

Mark the short answers · 10 per book

Each question earns one point for a defensible answer and one for a precise supporting detail with explanation. A missing or materially contradictory answer earns zero. Accept other readings grounded in the text.

Mark the essay · 20 per book

Score five categories from 0 to 4: arguable thesis, accuracy and spread of evidence, explanation of technique, engagement with a counterreading, and coherence and precision. Four means sustained accurate performance; three, a specific limitation; two, partial or uneven development; one, minimal relevant work; zero, no assessable evidence.

Course total · 180 points

Inspect the actual essay and check its references in the course reader. Word counts and submitted fields establish mechanical completion only. The classroom schedule includes discussion and revision; the timed exercise covers reading and writing.

The Yellow Wallpaper

Charlotte Perkins Gilman · short answers /10 · essay /20

1. What do John and the narrator each infer from the rented house and her illness in the opening entries? Give one piece of evidence for each position.

Her early suspicion and her desire for work or company contrast with John’s rational explanation and prescribed rest. Distinguish his medical authority from her private judgment.

2. Track the wallpaper under two kinds of light. How does a change in the conditions of looking change the observer’s conclusion?

Track the foreground pattern, the apparent woman behind it and the effect of daylight versus moonlight. Explain how changing conditions destabilize the identification.

3. Compare the nailed bed or the groove along the wall with a material detail in the final scene. Separate what is observable from what the narrator infers.

Distinguish physical evidence (e.g., the fixed bed, gnawing or rubbed mark) from the account of who produced it. Connect a late movement to the early description.

4. Explain how the secret writing and the interruption of entries affect what a reader can know. Cite two occasions.

Private parenthetical confessions and the need to put the journal away make silence an active constraint. Supply two distinct locations or incidents.

5. Read the locked-door exchange and the last sentence closely. Give two defensible, competing interpretations of her apparent victory.

The key outside, John’s collapse and the continuing circuit matter. Evaluate both escape from authority and captivity within the pattern of creeping.

Essay focus

Who has the authority to describe a sickroom? Build a claim about how Gilman makes the same physical space support incompatible accounts. Consider a plausible rival reading.

Apply the five-category rubric on page 1. Record an exact passage that supports or challenges the essay’s central claim.

Trifles

Susan Glaspell · short answers /10 · essay /20

1. Identify two details in the initial stage direction and explain how each shapes what the audience expects the investigators to notice.

Preserve two concrete opening props or placements and their implications for interrupted work or the separation of the investigators from the women.

2. Reconstruct Hale’s arrival on the previous morning. Separate his reported observation, Minnie’s statement, and his interpretation.

Separate the rocking or pleating observed at the kitchen chair from Minnie’s report that John had died and Hale’s impressions about her reaction.

3. Trace the stitches, cage and bird in the order in which the women encounter them. What does each add, and what remains unproved?

Irregular stitching suggests disturbance; the broken cage door suggests force; the wrapped dead bird with a wrung neck suggests motive. No witness establishes who killed the bird or John.

4. Compare Mrs. Hale’s memory of Minnie with Mrs. Peters’s memories of the kitten and the child. What changes in their relationship?

Minnie Foster’s singing or clothing illuminates a prior social self. The kitten and child memories teach Mrs. Peters what silence and violent loss can mean. Identify the shift in action.

5. Who tries to move the box at the end and who succeeds? Explain how the final joke and the placement of the pocket communicate to an audience.

The sheriff’s wife tries to conceal the box; her bag is too small, and Mrs. Hale pockets it. The knot remark links quilting vocabulary, the rope and a withheld conclusion.

Essay focus

How does Glaspell use stage space, props and withheld speech to make the audience responsible for weighing evidence? Address a serious objection to the women’s decision.

Apply the five-category rubric on page 1. Record an exact passage that supports or challenges the essay’s central claim.

The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde

Robert Louis Stevenson · short answers /10 · essay /20

1. In “Story of the Door,” reconstruct exactly what Enfield sees and how the cheque is verified. Distinguish evidence from his account of blackmail.

The collision with the child, confrontation, cash and a signed cheque concern Enfield personally. His bank visit establishes that the signature or cheque is good. Blackmail is his hypothesis.

2. In “The Carew Murder Case” and “Incident of the Letter,” track two objects. Explain which inferences are warranted when Utterson first encounters them.

The broken cane joins the assault to the household; matching handwriting in two letters creates a new question. A reasonable inference must stop short of direct proof of identity.

3. Why does the scene at the window fail to settle the case? Attend to the order of looking, invitation and closure.

Explain the conversation, the momentary smile and sudden terror, the closed window, and the limited knowledge left to witnesses.

4. Follow Poole and Utterson through the break-in. Identify one convincing sensory detail and one interpretation that those present get wrong.

Poole’s voice or physical-size comparison matters and so does what enters by ear. The corpse is Hyde’s body. The expectation of a separately murdered master is unfounded.

5. Compare Lanyon’s narrative with Jekyll’s statement on the role of choice in the transformation. What can each narrator actually attest to?

Lanyon observes the mechanical preparation and bodily change; Jekyll supplies first-person motives and earlier behavior. Distinguish the initially deliberate experiment from unbidden changes.

Essay focus

Why does Stevenson give the legal investigator so much of the narrative and then give the last word to two doctors? Test your argument against evidence from the opening, the search and both final accounts.

Apply the five-category rubric on page 1. Record an exact passage that supports or challenges the essay’s central claim.

A Christmas Carol

Charles Dickens · short answers /10 · essay /20

1. How do the charity collectors' visit and Marley's chain expose different meanings of business? Identify a precise detail from each exchange.

Connect the counting-house language, prisons or workhouses to the chain Marley forged in life and his account of neglected obligations.

2. In Stave Two, contrast the economics of Fezziwig's party with the parting between Belle and the younger Scrooge.

Use the party's apparent cost, employment relationship or authority over working conditions; contrast with the idol of Gain and Belle's release of the promise.

3. Follow one material object at the Cratchits' dinner. How does Dickens make the reader see both pleasure and shortage without canceling either?

Use exact dinner details: pudding, goose, gravy, potatoes or applesauce. Connect shared ritual and the small provision without assuming the family does not feel pleasure.

4. What is the order in which the last Spirit shows an unregretted death, the Cratchits' grief and the grave? Why delay the name?

Sequence the city conversations, trade in stolen possessions and/or covered body, then the mourned child, then the named stone. Explain how anonymity controls recognition.

5. In Stave Five, identify two acts of repair. How can a reader distinguish a practical act from a kindly intention?

Specify concrete assistance after the change: the turkey, charity donation, visit to Fred, raised pay or help for the Cratchits. Distinguish a promise confirmed by narration from an intended kindness.

Essay focus

What does Dickens make Scrooge learn about interpreting evidence before he can spend his money differently? Develop an argument across at least three staves and assess the limits of individual generosity.

Apply the five-category rubric on page 1. Record an exact passage that supports or challenges the essay's central claim.

The Machine Stops

E. M. Forster · short answers /10 · essay /20

1. In Part I, compare Vashti's first exchange with Kuno and the unfamiliar experience on the airship. Identify one specific physical inconvenience in each.

The telecommunication exchange leaves touch or physical presence unavailable; travel exposes discomfort, an unfamiliar human attendant or unwanted light. Tie details to Vashti's values.

2. Reconstruct Kuno's route to the surface and his return. Identify what the Book can explain and what only his body teaches him.

Give particulars of the shaft, ladder, gap/stopper, hillside or retrieval mechanism. Explain embodied proportion or effort against navigable technical information.

3. How do a lecture and the ritual surrounding the Book each turn mediated knowledge into authority? Locate them in their narrative context.

Identify how secondhand or progressively mediated ideas are ranked; contact with or veneration of the Book takes on ritual power. Note changes in the social order.

4. Distinguish an early change in service quality from a late failure that puts lives in immediate danger. How do people respond to each?

Track a concrete defect, ritual accommodation and eventual physical danger. Explain how expectation of repair shapes the delay in action.

5. What exactly can Vashti and Kuno see or know at the end? Separate what the text shows from a prediction about survivors.

End with the reunion, destruction and a glimpse of sky; distinguish Kuno's testimony about surface people from any guaranteed account of their future.

Essay focus

How does Forster stage a disagreement about what counts as a good idea? Test the defense of mediated knowledge against Kuno's experience and the story's ending.

Apply the five-category rubric on page 1. Record an exact passage that supports or challenges the essay's central claim.

The Great Gatsby

F. Scott Fitzgerald · short answers /10 · essay /20

1. Compare the principle of Nick’s father (paraphrase it) with one early instance in which Nick judges somebody. Do his admissions make him more reliable?

Use the father’s caution about unequal advantages and a judgment Nick makes. Acknowledge both disarming candor and the limits of retrospective selection.

2. Trace the books in Gatsby’s library, the medal and the Oxford photograph. What does each artifact establish, and what does it leave open?

The library contains real printed books with uncut pages; an actual decoration and Oxford group photograph lend plausibility without authenticating every part of the biography.

3. Reconstruct the colors, ownership, passengers and drivers of the cars on the outbound and return journeys in Chapter VII. Identify which facts reach the reader at second hand.

Outbound: Tom drives Gatsby’s yellow car with Nick and Jordan; Gatsby and Daisy take Tom’s blue coupé. Return: Daisy drives yellow with Gatsby; Tom, Nick and Jordan follow in the blue car. Gatsby privately names the driver; other testimony identifies the car.

4. Compare the green light before and after the reunion with what Nick makes it mean at the end. Separate Gatsby’s behavior from Nick’s interpretation.

First reach across water; after reunion, possible loss of enchantment; in the conclusion, a future receding before desire. Distinguish the narrator’s speculative account from directly seen gesture.

5. Contrast the conduct of two associates after Gatsby dies with that of Mr. Gatz or Owl Eyes. What challenges Nick’s account of total abandonment?

Examples: the call about shoes, refusal of Wolfsheim, Mr. Gatz traveling with treasured records, Owl Eyes attending the cemetery. Public mourning differs from actual or reported affection.

Essay focus

When Nick turns a particular man’s failure into an American story, what earns him the right to generalize and what resists him? Argue from at least three chapters, including the final one, and develop a counterreading.

Apply the five-category rubric on page 1. Record an exact passage that supports or challenges the essay’s central claim.