Writing the Formal Literary Analysis - The Process

Drafting
Spend a bit of time re-reading the paper requirements and topic suggestions and do some brainstorming. There are also a number of suggestions on how to go about writing a literary analysis, so go through those suggestions for hints on how to organize your paper, etc. You may find the reading on Paragraphing in Academic Writing to be helpful in producing your first draft, and then revising it—once you've got a basic thesis and a couple of points you want to make. Basically, this reading gives you a "checklist" for what a paragraph should contain. Thus, once you know your basic points, you can create one or more paragraphs on each point quite easily by just using the "formula."

FOR EXAMPLE
Say that I've decided to write about the conventions of romantic suspense as they are used in Eberhart's "Spider." One of my points might be:

Eberhart's story makes use of a gothic, mysterious, and oppressive atmosphere in the house to build the tension of the story.

This point forms the **TOPIC SENTENCE** for my paragraph. I then look at the "checklist" for an academic paragraph and see that I must now **EXPLAIN** my point. So I might write:

The story's gothic atmosphere stems partly from dark interior of the house, including its dark woodwork, while the oppressiveness stems in part from the cold, dislike of some of the inhabitants. The sense that there is a dark mystery behind the house and its inhabitants is another strong element that builds the tension.

Then, checking my list again, I see that I must now **INTRODUCE** and **GIVE EVIDENCE** for my point. You'll note that in my explanation, I begin to do that, but it somewhat vague. Here, then, is my opportunity to **SHOW** my point. So I might write:

For example, when Susan Dare enters the house for the first time, the house is described as "utterly, completely still" and, as Susan follows Jessica upstairs, as "increasingly hot and airless" (242). These characteristics are repeated to give added emphasis, "So terrifically hot the house was;" "So very silent" (242). Further, Susan senses that this is "not a pleasant house," but that something else, besides the "silence and heat and brooding, secretive old walls" have frightened Caroline (242).

Finally, I must wrap up what is now becoming a longish paragraph. I do so by **EXPLAINING MY EVIDENCE, TYING IT BACK TO MY POINT**, and by adding a bit of closure with a **POINT SUMMARY**. I explain my evidence and tie it to my point so that the reader clearly sees the connection (remember, the best of readers is lazy—spell it out for them so that they don't have to think). I sum up my paragraph with a repetition of my point to help remind the reader of where we've been before going further. Thus, I might finish up my paragraph with:

The stillness of the house and its suffocating heat make the house physically uncomfortable for Susan and begins to affect her psychological response to the situation. The house becomes symbolic of the mystery she must investigate and the obstacles she must overcome in completing her investigation. It also begins to embody Caroline's fear and one begins to wonder if the house, itself, is the source of the trouble; is the house "evil"? Thus, the way in which the story makes use of the physical setting of the house to build a gothic, mysterious, and oppressive atmosphere also increase the overall tension of the story.

**And here is my full, basic paragraph:**

Eberhart's story makes use of a gothic, mysterious, and oppressive atmosphere in the house to build the tension of the story. The story's gothic atmosphere stems partly from dark
interior of the house, including its dark woodwork, while the oppressiveness stems in part from the cold, dislike of some of the inhabitants. The sense that there is a dark mystery behind the house and its inhabitants is another strong element that builds the tension. For example, when Susan Dare enters the house for the first time, the house is described as "utterly, completely still" and, as Susan follows Jessica upstairs, as "increasingly hot and airless" (242). These characteristics are repeated to give added emphasis, "So terrifically hot the house was;" "So very silent" (242). Further, Susan senses that this is "not a pleasant house," but that something else, besides the "silence and heat and brooding, secretive old walls" have frightened Caroline (242). The stillness of the house and its suffocating heat make the house physically uncomfortable for Susan and begins to affect her psychological response to the situation. The house becomes symbolic of the mystery she must investigate and the obstacles she must overcome in completing her investigation. It also begins to embody Caroline’s fear and one begins to wonder if the house, itself, is the source of the trouble; is the house “evil”? Thus, the way in which the story makes use of the physical setting of the house to build a gothic, mysterious, and oppressive atmosphere also increase the overall tension of the story.

Revising

Obviously, I must now go back and work out the kinks of my initial draft. So, how would I revise this paragraph? First, I would go back to my checklist and look at the individual elements of a paragraph again and see if I really met the requirements. (After all, I DID write this up rather hastily—I was just pushing to get out some ideas, not focusing at how well I was doing the job.)

When I look at the paragraph more closely, I realize that I DON’T HAVE JUST ONE POINT in this paragraph. LOOK at the first sentence; it contains several elements that could EACH FORM ITS OWN PARAGRAPH. I mention a gothic atmosphere (which is really awkward wording—so there's another thing to revise), plus I add that it is mysterious and it is oppressive. I could really have a paragraph about each of these atmospheric elements. To fix this problem easily, I would look at the evidence I have managed to insert into the paragraph and see what it proves.

I note that my evidence appears to relate to the oppressive atmosphere created by the house's stillness and excessive heat. I have a quote about the walls being "brooding" and I try to tie these examples to the effect the house has on Caroline psychologically. Thus, it appears—FROM THE EVIDENCE—THAT MY POINT IS that the house's atmosphere is oppressive and this atmosphere contributes to a particular character’s feeling of oppression and fright.

Thus, in revising the paragraph, I would first eliminate the tangential (but related) points to reflect the evidence I can easily bring in. If I felt that these other related points were important enough, I could build paragraphs around them; otherwise, I make the very difficult decision to CUT, CUT, CUT WHAT DOES NOT BELONG. I realize that it is hard—you've invested time and effort in getting out these ideas. However, a unified paragraph demands we adhere to the one idea per paragraph rule. However, I might be able to keep the other stuff for another paragraph in the paper.

Next, as I revise, I must look at the role that the first sentence of each paragraph plays as a "topic sentence." I will want to make each of these first sentences a strong, arguable assertion; after all, I am writing an academic argument about the text in question. I am trying to show the reader how the text works. OFTEN, the student writer will forget the importance of making an argument. So, my next step in revising this particular paragraph is to work on my topic sentence and make sure that it is not meant to be informational, but to argue a perspective on the text. I also must make sure that I am not presenting evidence in this sentence; the evidence comes in later to prove the point of the paragraph.

Then, I will move on to the other parts of the paragraph in the checklist and I will check to see if I have really fulfilled the criteria for these items, just as I did for the topic sentence. This is the hard work of revising: critically reviewing your text for flaws and missteps.
Finally, I will move from the content of the paragraph to the sentence structure, word choice, and punctuation of the paragraph. I will look at each sentence (and then each word) to judge its clarity and precision. **When I have gone through the process, I might end up with the following paragraph:**

In Eberhart's story, the house's oppressive atmosphere accentuates the mystery that Susan Dare is sent to investigate and symbolizes the obstacles, including Caroline's fear, that she must overcome in completing her investigation. The house is oppressive in part because of its dark interior, but also because of the instant, cold dislike that permeates the character of Jessica, the first person to greet Susan. Further details about the house amplify its oppressiveness and suggest that there is a impenetrable mystery behind the house and its inhabitants, like when Susan first enters the house, it is described as "utterly, completely still" and as "increasingly hot and airless" (242). These traits are repeated for added emphasis; the house is "So terrifically hot" and "So very silent" (242). Further, the house's oppressive atmosphere leads Susan to believe that it is "not a pleasant house" and that its "silence and heat and brooding, secretive old walls" have ignited Caroline's fear (242). Because the suffocating heat makes the house physically uncomfortable for Susan, it begins to affect her psychologically. If she is to solve the mystery, she must understand why the house is so oppressive, including how Jessica kept the house hot in order to mask the time of death and why Caroline was afraid that supernatural forces were at work in the form of astral bodies.

The result is a tighter focus within the paragraph, an increase in the use of concrete textual details to support the ideas, and more explanation of this now narrower point.

**Finally, remember that each and every paragraph makes an argument about the literature. You are not merely summarizing the plot of the work.** In other words, you are writing an analysis—not making a report. You are trying to show me something interesting about the text—how it uses particular genre elements, how it defines the detective, how it employs certain symbols, etc. Your references to the text(s) are your proof for your argument.