

Guidelines for Successfully Writing and Presenting a Literary Club Paper

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Some Basic Guidelines

Gibby Carey, regarded by many as one of the best writers and readers of club papers, wrote: “The primary purpose of your paper is not to display scholastic skill, but to entertain and inform an audience for whom your paper will probably address subject matter that is new and hopefully interesting.”

The paper can be funny, poetic, emotional, challenging, informative, whatever will catch and keep your listeners’ attention.

The paper may tell a story if that is the best structure for it. There must be some reason that you have chosen this subject, and that reason should come through to the members. The paper should reflect your interest in whatever way you wish, and your delight in discovery or surprise at a new learning or unusual experience makes for a richer experience for all. It may have a beginning, a middle, and an end, if these fit. Try to infuse some humor into your paper as well.

We are first a Literary Club, so our papers should be the finest piece of writing we can produce. Note: reading a paper means reading a paper. It does not mean speaking extemporaneously with or without notes.

The paper must be our own work and all sources should be acknowledged.

- If you rely on a major source, you should identify it in the paper.
- Other sources could be footnoted but footnotes need not be read.
- Paul Franz’s paper on the Ohio Hegelians is footnoted like a graduate school paper, and is not the norm.
- This leads to the suggestion that if you are relying on just one or two sources for your paper, you may be missing a lot.
- If there are several sources that provided background for your paper, a bibliography attached to the paper would be helpful and is appropriate.

The first reading or publication of the paper must be with the Club. After reading it, you may submit it or publish it wherever you like.

Subject Matter

A first paper does not have to be a confessional piece. You do not need to disclose your most intimate secrets to be accepted or to explain why you chose the topic. Do not begin your paper by telling us what a great group we are and how humble you feel addressing us.

1. We already know that.
2. Beginning a paper is like diving off the high dive: just do it.

Your choice of a topic tells us all we need to know about you, your interests, and what you admire. Some good examples include:

- Al Lopez's paper about a Mexican physician who emigrated to the United States and Cincinnati. Al used the framework of his friend's life to talk about our immigration laws and relations with Mexico over the last century and in doing so told us more about himself than if he had been writing about himself.
- Bob Watkins' paper about working on his grandparents' farm as a boy. This was an experience several other Club members have had. The experience helped make Bob who he is, but he dwelt more on making it come alive for us than making a deep psychological inquiry into himself, and that's what made other members identify with his experience and made it a great paper.

There is no hard and fast limitation on a topic. Be cautious about recounting experiences in your profession or travel unless they are of general interest or you are a good enough writer to make them of general interest. You can certainly write about your business or profession. Some good examples include;

- A physician's paper on patients who had seemingly incurable ailments but survived
- Gibby Carey's papers about life at P&G

What are not appropriate are papers about what a great doctor you are or how you won the legal case with a brilliant closing argument. In other words, don't brag. Papers about what a great business man or financial advisor you are or how you made a fortune in investments risk making your listeners jealous or wishing you had told them the secret for your success while they could still get in on it. Whenever I've asked our financial advisors what they think the markets are going to do, they clam up pretty quickly.

You can write about travel but remember to tell a story, not recite a travelogue. Some good examples include:

- Joe Dehner's paper on travelling to North Korea
- Jim Fitzgerald's paper about being captured along with his family after a wedding in Venezuela and barely escaping with their lives

What loses an audience very quickly is a paper about a family vacation with those marvelous grandchildren who are just learning to swim. If you have doubts about a family paper, and you should have doubts, share your paper with another club member for some insight on how it might go over. You risk disaster if you do not do this.

Avoid "term papers" that read as "potted history," where the author takes some very minor by-way in history, researches it, and builds a paper around it without any anchor for interest. All too often these sound like a term paper for an undergraduate history class. Certainly there are exceptions, such as Dale Flick's nautical history papers and some history papers that have a Club connection.

Topics to Avoid

Although your paper may well provide new information and insights to the members, an attempt to harangue on a political or religious topic will come across as presumptuous and disruptive. Do not make a joke about a religion you do not practice, or repeat a political barb thrown at a candidate or politician you can't stand. Stay away from current politics and biographies of current politicians so you don't deeply offend someone of a contrary persuasion. "Current" probably means within the last 30 years. A long time member gave a fine paper on LBJ about 30 years after Johnson's death.

Some issues that are not perceived as partisan, such as an analysis of why the Cincinnati School System is consistently rated D or F are acceptable. Dick Wendell's paper on health care costs analyzed a highly contentious subject but avoided partisan language and ideology by making the paper analytical and thus timely and appropriate for the Club. State the facts and make your analysis, and you will give us all something to think about even if in the end we don't all agree with you.

Unless you are a very good writer, it's best to stay away from explicit sex scenes. These are best enjoyed in private and not with a few dozen elderly men sitting around listening.

Illustrations should not be a substantive part of a paper. Because your paper is a literary paper, it should not rely upon graphs or illustrations. This rule is commonly broken with no bad consequences when the reader has an illustration for us to look at after the paper has been read. Consult with someone on the Board of Management if you believe it is essential to use something visual to present your paper.

Length

A budget should be around 2,000 words and last about fifteen minutes. A regular paper should be between about 4,000 and 5,000 words and last around thirty-five to forty minutes with forty minutes about the norm. A few papers shorter than thirty-five minutes have been extraordinary, and a very few longer than 45 minutes have held interest. As Samuel Johnson said of Milton's *Paradis Lost*, "No one would wish it longer." Remember that your paper stands between the members and their Club supper.

If your paper goes over these lengths, try cutting 100 words. Then read the paper. It will probably be better. Then cut another 100 words. Do this until it stops getting better. Do this for every paper.

A time comes when some members can no longer produce a coherent regular length paper, so they fill up their time with several unrelated topics stitched together. If a member has this difficulty, ask the clerk to be assigned a budget where the presenter only has to produce a short paper and two other members can fill in the gaps.

Feel free to ask another member to read your paper and offer comments. This may be the best way to find if you are on track. There is a "mentor or critic" review option available. The writer can

enlist another member as a mentor for suggestions in writing a paper or a critic to make positive suggestions on the content and delivery after the paper is read.

Presentation

Begin by stating the title of your paper.

A successful reading at the Club begins with a paper written from the beginning to be read aloud. Most of us are accustomed to write for someone silently reading our words to themselves. It helps to always think of your listener, rather than your reader as you write. When a paper is read aloud, it is a fleeting moment with no ability to go back and reread a sentence. While our members are educated men with ample vocabularies, unusual metaphors and references will cause your audience to pause for a moment to recall the reference, which will cause them to miss the next couple of sentences. Oral reading can make longer periodic sentences work, as long as the sentences are written with a spoken rhythm, cadence, and phrasing in mind. As you write each paragraph ask yourself, is there anything here that will cause the listener, as opposed to the reader to pause in his listening. Also ask how you would read this paragraph aloud to maximize its intelligibility and impact for your listener.

Always practice reading the paper aloud enough times that you are not stumbling over words or punctuations. Besides giving confidence, it also provides an opportunity to edit words or phrases that don't roll off your tongue. Some members practice by standing in front of a mirror and many have a rehearsal audience of spouse or friend to critique. Part of this practice is to force yourself to remember to read slowly. This is not a conversation, and many members have hearing problems. Don't let your enthusiasm or nervousness push the pace beyond listeners' comprehension. The audience won't notice that you are speaking a little slower than normal conversation because they will be able to understand you. The presentation of your paper has everything to do with its success.

Number the pages and put your paper in a notebook to avoid missing a page or have difficulty turning a page.

Adjust the microphone and speak clearly into it. If you are not sure whether members in the back can hear, ask them before you begin.

Publication

The paper is your own property. If you don't want it published on our website or a copy sent to the Historical Society, you don't have to submit a copy to the clerk. Fran Barret has withheld two fine papers from our annual volume and from the Historical Society. This is his right as the author.

If you are planning to submit your paper after you have given it to some publication, note that publication on our web site may be considered a "prior publication" that may disqualify your paper from some publications.