Writing literature essays: a brief summary

1. The study of literature is distinct because it:
   - requires the perspective and the skills of literary criticism, as well as a particular, discipline-specific vocabulary and style of analysis
   - often requires more personal interpretation and expression than other subjects
   - has a special 'voice' (manner of speaking and writing); while the 'voice' in the literature may be ambiguous, the literary critic must not be.

Strategies:
   - Observe how the lecturer talks about literature: what is the accepted manner of speaking and writing? Model the voice he/she uses.
   - Use the tutorials to participate and practise the voice of the literary critic; what kinds of questions are asked and which are the most useful in analysing a piece of literature?

2. Lecturers’ expectations of literary essays are similar to those of other academic essays. Your essay should:
   - be clearly focussed on the set topic and deal fully with its central concerns
   - be the result of close and critical reading
   - present a reasoned argument
   - be competently presented.

Strategies:
   - Read literature aloud to get a sense of the tone of the writer.
   - Examine past essay questions: what kinds of questions are there?
   - Use secondary sources for background/possible interpretations, but be guided by your lecturer as to which to choose, and note that these sources are not a substitute for your own interpretation.
   - Provide evidence to justify your assertions (ie quotes).
   - Reference your work meticulously according to accepted conventions in the Department in which you are studying.

3. How to improve your literature essays:
   - Approach your tutor for help – clarify expectations.
   - Come to the Academic Skills and Learning Centre for an individual appointment and/or review some sample, first-year literature essays.
   - Analyse the comments on marked essays.