SOME SAMPLE RESEARCH PAPER IDEAS

These are just topics to get you started. However, they might inspire you to adapt one to your favorite author or book. Please note that many of these would need to be narrowed down to be covered in a 2,000-word research paper.

GENERAL IDEAS:
Analyze a common theme in a particular writer’s works
Discuss the use of rhythm, rhyme, symbolism, satire, or other technique in a writer’s works
Analyze a writer’s use of a specific genre’s literary techniques
Discuss the relationship between a particular writer’s personal life and literary works
Address how a particular series by one author develops, changes, maintains common symbols or metaphors, etc.
Compare/contrast two writers, discussing aspects of their lives and works
Find and analyze a particular poet’s use of metaphors in his/her works
Compare/contrast an adaptation of a work (e.g., movie, video game, comic book, TV program) with the original
Examine an author’s associations with other significant people/groups/movements of the time (literary circles, political organizations, causes, etc.)
Discuss how one author’s work expresses the American experience (or the black experience, or the immigrant experience, etc.)
Discuss a particular period of a writer’s work in relation to how it developed at other times (e.g., a “phase”)
Analyze the setting of one or more of a writer’s works and its impact on the characters and/or plot
Analyze repetitive themes in one author’s works (e.g., outsider as hero, good vs. evil, coming of age)
Comment on an author’s use of humor throughout his/her works
Analyze religious symbols and metaphors in a work or an author’s works

MORE-SPECIFIC IDEAS, ORGANIZED BY POSSIBLE READING STRATEGY:

Psychological:
The Oedipus theme in literature
Trace the interrelationship of the Glass family as depicted in the fiction of J.D. Salinger
The personalized religion and mythology of William Blake
Guilt and damnation in the stories of Kafka
The code of Hemingway’s heroes
Discuss why young readers see Harry Potter as such an appealing hero

Biographical:
Aldous Huxley’s drug experiences and their relation to his writings
Autobiographical elements in the novels of F. Scott Fitzgerald
The popularity of William Faulkner in Europe during the early stages of his career
The contribution of Thomas Wolfe’s editor, Maxwell Perkins, to Wolfe’s novels
Kurt Vonnegut’s war experiences as reflected in Slaughterhouse-Five and other fiction

The Catholicism of Graham Greene as evidenced in his fiction
Compare/contrast critical evaluations of Kurt Vonnegut’s early novels with some of his later ones
The Irish nationalism of William Butler Yeats
Investigate the effects of the Spanish Civil War on the literary works of Hemingway

Mythological:
The devil and witchcraft in the fiction of Isaac Bashevis Singer
The Oedipus myth in modern literature
The connection of Book of the Dead to the religion of ancient Egypt
Religious themes in Dostoevsky’s fiction
Discuss the theme of the apocalypse in P.B. Shelley’s “Ozymandias,” W.B. Yeats’ “The Second Coming,” and other works
Compare/contrast Zeus in Homer’s Iliad with God in John Milton’s Paradise Lost
Elements of the Greek epic tradition
Discuss the idea that there are no new stories, only new ways of telling them – and give specific examples

Gender:
Career or motherhood: role conflict in the poetry of Adrienne Rich
Discuss gay influences in the works of Augusten Burroughs and Chuck Palahniuk
Aspects of feminism in the works of Doris Lessing, Toni Morrison, and Margaret Drabble

The common theme of motherhood in the works of Scarlett O’Hara as an alienated heroine in \textit{Gone with the Wind} and Margaret Atwood’s \textit{The Handmaid’s Tale}

Investigate Joan Didion’s depiction of alienated heroines

Investigate the epistolary novel form used in Choderlos de Lacroix’s \textit{Les Liaisons Dangereuses} (\textit{Dangerous Liaisons})

The stream of consciousness style in James Joyce’s \textit{Ulysses}

Discuss the epistolary novel form in \textit{The Sound and the Fury}

Discuss the five-act format of \textit{The Hound of the Baskervilles}

\textbf{Formalist:}

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The stream of consciousness style in James Joyce’s \textit{Ulysses}

The elements of haiku poetry

Flower imagery in the fiction of \textit{The Handmaid’s Tale}

Discuss Alexander Pope’s use of the mock epic technique in \textit{The Rape of the Lock}

Discuss \textit{The Great Gatsby} as a symbol of the “American Dream”

Compare/contrast Margaret Mitchell’s \textit{Gone with the Wind} and Alice Randall’s \textit{The Wind Done Gone}

Compare/contrast \textit{The Great Gatsby} as a symbol of the “American Dream”

Compare/contrast L. Frank Baum’s \textit{The Wonderful Wizard of Oz} and Gregory Maguire’s \textit{Wicked}

William Golding’s \textit{Lord of the Flies} as a 20th-century allegory

Compare/contrast \textit{The Catcher in the Rye} as a forerunner of the hippie movement

\textbf{Historical/cultural:}

How literary “monsters” have changed from the time of Mary Shelley’s \textit{Frankenstein}

George Orwell’s \textit{Animal Farm} as an allegory of the USSR

The influence of Henry Miller on “beat generation” writers

The Vietnam War as reflected in post-apocalyptic novels such as Aldous Huxley’s \textit{Brave New World} and Margaret Atwood’s \textit{The Handmaid’s Tale}

Accusations of racism against Mark Twain’s \textit{Huckleberry Finn} and the advisability of its inclusion in a high school literature class

Analyze the effects of the Spanish Civil War on the literary works of Hemingway

Address how Thackeray uses the novel for social criticism

Discuss A.L. Bader’s claim that “‘Nothing happens in [modern] stories’” and give detailed examples as well as historical context (Why does this happen in the modern period?)

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Discuss A.L. Bader’s claim that “‘Nothing happens in [modern] stories’” and give detailed examples as well as historical context (Why does this happen in the modern period?)
Compare/contrast Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* with director Francis Ford Coppola’s movie *Apocalypse Now*, being sure to address historical contexts.

Compare/contrast Ralph Ellison’s view of the South in *Invisible Man* with Faulkner’s view of it in “A Rose for Emily” and other stories.

Social criticism in the works of Henry Fielding

Discuss dark humor in the works of Augusten Burroughs and Chuck Palahniuk

Explain how Ellison’s *Invisible Man* was both indicative of its time period (both the time its events take place and the time it was written and published) and influential on later real-life events.

Compare Orwell’s novel *1984* to contemporary culture

Discuss Southern attitudes toward African-Americans in the fiction of William Faulkner

Explain the historical context of the Beat Generation: why and how it developed (as a reaction to earlier events?) and the influence it had on later movements

Discuss the possibility that Shakespeare was not the author of all the works now attributed to him, and consider who may have written them

Boris Pasternak’s *Dr. Zhivago* as social commentary

Trace the gradual emergence of a distinctively American literature through the writings of the first half of the 19th century

The satiric thrust of Voltaire’s *Candide* as seen in its historical connotations

The portrayal of aristocratic society in Henry James’ *The Americans*

Social and political propaganda in Upton Sinclair’s *The Jungle*

New York society as portrayed in Edith Wharton’s *The Age of Innocence*

American naturalism in the novels of Frank Norris and his debt to Emile Zola

Compare Boccaccio’s tales from *The Decameron* and Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales*

The “upper class” as portrayed in F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby*

Didacticism in the poetry of John Dryden

Social commentary in Steinbeck’s *The Grapes of Wrath*; is it still relevant today?

The black experience in America as viewed in Richard Wright’s *Native Son*, James Baldwin’s *Blues for Mr. Charlie*, and Ralph Ellison’s *The Invisible Man*

Novels of political protest in America (several from the same time period)

Alan Paton’s *Cry, the Beloved Country* as political propaganda

Important retellings in English of the Arthurian legends after Malory’s *Morte D’Arthur*

**Other ideas:**

Characterize the Byronic hero and give examples from various literary works

The Agatha Christie mystery: plot, style, character, and structure

American family life in the novels of John Updike

A character analysis of Aschenbach in Thomas Mann’s *Death in Venice*

The gothic in the short fiction of Flannery O’Connor

Satire of the academic world in Bernard Malamud’s novel *A New Life*

The portrayal of poor white people in the fiction of Faulkner

How the literary reputation of Sinclair Lewis has changed

Compare a variety of literary appraisals of the works of Ernest Hemingway

Satire and irony in John Irving’s *The World According to Garp*

Compare/contrast the early writings of Truman Capote with more recent ones in terms of style, tone, content, characterization, etc.

Nathanael West’s grim view of the world in *The Day of the Locust*

Existentialism as expressed in Albert Camus’ *The Stranger*

Montage in T.S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land*

Critical appraisals of the poetry of James Dickey

Loneliness as a major theme in the writings of Carson McCullers

The meaning of catharsis in Aristotle’s *Poetics*

Alexander Pope’s concept of nature

Sinclair Lewis as critic of American values

Compare/contrast the poetry of Carl Sandburg and Robert Frost

Varying interpretations of Miguel Cervantes’ *Don Quijote*

Common elements in the poetry of Coleridge and Wordsworth, especially in *Lyrical Ballads*

Compare the final episodes of Sir Thomas Malory’s *Morte D’Arthur* and Alfred, Lord Tennyson’s “Morte D’Arthur” in *Idylls of the King*

Sentimentalism and sentiment in the short stories of Bret Harte

Different views of the nature of evil as expressed in the book of Job in the Bible

The pessimism of Mark Twain’s later works

William Blake as visionary hero

Compare/contrast the attitudes toward nature and society in Henry David Thoreau’s *Walden* and Walt Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass*
Compare/contrast John Updike’s novel *Oil!* with Paul Thomas Anderson’s movie *There Will Be Blood*
Discuss the Mississippi River as a symbol in *Huckleberry Finn*
Identify common themes and values in the works of Beat Generation writers such as Allen Ginsberg, Lawrence Ferlinghetti, Michael McClure, Jack Kerouac, and Gregory Corso
Discuss the sardonic wit and common sense of Dorothy Parker’s poetry
Compare/contrast the heroines of Willa Cather’s *O Pioneers!* and Thomas Hardy’s *Tess of the D’Urbervilles*
Compare/contrast T.S. Eliot’s poem *The Waste Land* and Andrew Lloyd Weber’s Broadway show *Cats*
Compare/contrast plot, structure, or point of view in Mark Twain’s *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* and *Huckleberry Finn*
Discuss the poetry of the blues (music), perhaps in the context of race and social class
Explain the role of religion in Yann Martel’s *Life of Pi*
Compare/contrast the attitudes toward death in *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* (both by Homer)
Compare/contrast a modern rapper’s works with Gwendolyn Brooks’ poetry
Explain the use of time by John Fowles in *The French Lieutenant’s Woman*
Compare/contrast the satiric techniques of Alexander Pope and Jonathan Swift, especially in Pope’s “The Rape of the Lock” and Swift’s “The Battle of the Books”
Compare/contrast Roald Dahl’s *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* with the two movie adaptations of it
Compare/contrast the heroines of Jane Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice* and *Emma*
Discuss the basic change in the cosmic picture from Charles Dickens’ *Bleak House* to George Eliot’s *The Mill on the Floss*
Levels of meaning in Dante’s *Inferno*
The role of the clergy in Stendhal’s *The Red and the Black*
Compare/contrast T.S. Eliot’s *Murder in the Cathedral* and Jean Anouilh’s *Becket*
Franz Kafka’s world of isolation, guilt, alienation, and punishment
Central themes in Ken Kesey’s *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest* illuminated by humor, paradox, and irony
Compare/contrast the “heroes” in a selection of detective fiction (Agatha Christie, Georges Simenon, Dorothy Sayers, Ross Macdonald, etc.)
A character analysis of Pangloss in Voltaire’s *Candide*
Analyze the main character in any of the following novels by Thomas Wolfe: *You Can’t Go Home Again; Of Time and the River; Look Homeward, Angel;* and *The Web and the Rock*
The role of guilt in Coleridge’s *Rime of the Ancient Mariner*
The function of setting in the novels of Charles Dickens
Blues as literature
Methodism as reflected in George Eliot’s *Adam Bede*
Samuel Butler’s revolt against authority, the establishment, and his parents as depicted in *The Way of All Flesh*
Compare/contrast the mystery fiction of Agatha Christie, Margery Allingham, and Dorothy L. Sayers
Existential influences in the novels of Ernest Hemingway
War and death in Stephen Crane’s *The Red Badge of Courage*
Contemporary Russian poetry, concentrating on several outstanding poets