

Short Paper Assignment

DUE THURSDAY, OCTOBER 13, AT 10 PM ON SAKAI (REVISED TIME)

Write a short paper making an interpretive argument about a problem or device in a single science-fiction novel or story we have read together (from Wells through Asimov). Your argument should also refer to a scholarly discussion of the science-fiction genre, though this is not the focus of the paper. When formatted according to the guidelines under “Format” below, your paper should be between six full pages and eight pages.

TOPICS

Choosing a topic is part of the assignment. A good topic leads you from a specific analytic focus to a significant, non-obvious interpretive conclusion about the text you choose. I am happy to consult with you on potential topics up to two days before the paper is due. Here are a few possible starting points:

Scale. By what means does a particular text invoke the huge, the tiny, the instantaneous, the endless? Do the tropes of science-fictional scale humble our limited perception, or do they suggest our imaginative mastery? What is deliberately or involuntarily omitted by the choice of scale?

Nature. SF may be characteristically associated with technology and mechanization, but it also works to represent and understand nature in distinctive ways. Focusing on a particular understanding of nature you can clearly define within a single text, analyze the tropes of nature in relation to science-fictional procedures and themes.

Will. What place does SF leave for individual agency? Choose a text and consider the tension between describing whole worlds as systems and the demands of plot, in which—ordinarily—individual decisions and actions play central causal roles. You need not focus on protagonists or narrators: in any case, consider not simply plot but narrative structure, the relation between description and narration, and the effects of style.

WRITING GUIDELINES

Careful analysis of textual evidence is central to this paper. We have been modeling this mode of analysis in class. Your claims should be supported by extensive *quotation*. To support a claim, it is not enough simply to quote; once you quote, you must *analyze* what you have quoted, paying close attention to the significance

of individual words, of syntactical and rhetorical patterns, of nuances and implications. Instead of attempting to paraphrase what a text means or summarize what it's about, *show how it works*. Do not take for granted that your reader will see the text the way you do: point out the details that can convince the reader of what you say. Every analytical claim you make should be supported by concrete evidence from the text; every part of your paper should make substantive analytical claims.

Your paper must address a significant, interesting, non-obvious question about one of the texts, and it must propose a clearly articulated, non-simplistic answer to that question. The question does not have to be a literal question; but successful papers always have a strong, focused *motive* for the particular analysis they carry out. Think about how your *highly specific* claims connect to broader questions about the author, genre, or theme your paper discusses, and how following your interpretation changes how readers should think about these questions. Think about what is most surprising about what you have to say; your engagement with a secondary source can be very helpful in developing motive. You may take for granted that your reader has in mind what has been discussed in class. (That also means that you should not repeat material from class. Spending too much of your paper on material or arguments already extensively discussed in class will weaken your motive.)

Motive is often established at the start of an essay. *Avoid writing a generalizing introduction*. Begin your essay with a surprising piece of evidence or observation of your own that immediately frames the topic you are going to address and establishes its interest. Then move from motive to argument: expanding on that initial piece of evidence, forecast the terms of your argument, then state the central, argumentative claim of the essay.

Your argument should answer your motivating question. That does not mean that every good paper resolves every problem it poses; on the contrary, good papers attend to the complexities of their subject matter. But an effective argument means your reader learns something from your analysis of your evidence. It will help to ask yourself what alternative arguments someone might make about your topic and to anticipate objections to your claims.

Think carefully about the *line of thought* of your writing, the way one claim leads to the next. "Transition sentences" are less important than your sense of the overall logic of your argument: think of the essay as a story you have to tell about the text you are analyzing, one with an arc from beginning to end. One of the most compelling ways to tell such a story is by thinking carefully about the *order of presentation of evidence*: indeed, you can "outline" a paper by first choosing the five or six passages that are most essential to your thinking and then deciding what

sequence they should be presented in. The best sequence is rarely the sequence of the text itself; don't start at the beginning and end at the end of your text. Choose an order that makes your point.

DRAFTS

Plan to draft and revise. You may send me partial or full drafts for brief comments, as long as you do so at least two days before the deadline. I will answer questions, time permitting, up through the day before the deadline.

FORMAT

Your paper should have 1.25-inch left and right margins, with text in twelve-point serif font (e.g.: Garamond, Hoefler Text, Palatino, Baskerville, or, less appealingly, Cambria, Times), and between one-and-a-half and double spacing. *Number all pages.* The paper should have your name and the date on the first page. Give your paper a meaningful title.

Submit your paper electronically via the Sakai Assignments tool. E-mail submissions are not acceptable. If you wish to turn in your paper in hard copy, please contact me in advance.

Digital submissions should be in Portable Document Format (PDF) if possible. Native word-processor formats (.doc, .docx, .pages, .odt) are a second-best alternative. All word processors can produce PDF files, through a "Save As..." option, an "Export" command, or a "Print to PDF" option in the print dialog.

STYLE

You must proofread carefully.

Quotations should be carefully transcribed, punctuated, and attributed. You may use MLA style or Chicago style; in either case, use parenthetical citations to refer to your primary source. If you use someone else's work, including someone's informal comments inside class or out, *you must cite that work.* Using someone else's work without specific citation is plagiarism. Consistency and thoroughness in citation is more important than exact fidelity to either MLA or Chicago style.

Please follow the conventions of standard written American English. I am non-prescriptive about things like the split infinitive, the sentence-final preposition, and "they" used as a gender-neutral singular pronoun. The passive voice is an excellent grammatical resource and can be used freely, provided it is used wisely.

The best resource on matters of usage is the *Merriam-Webster Dictionary of English Usage*, also available in a wonderful paperback Concise Edition. For detailed information about current and past word uses, the fundamental source is

the *Oxford English Dictionary*.

For grammar, I consider *The Cambridge Grammar of the English Language* by Rodney Huddleston and Geoffrey Pullum to be the reference standard; it is condensed in their slightly less daunting *Student's Introduction to English Grammar*.

LATE POLICY

Late papers will be graded. If I receive your late paper less than 48 hours after the deadline, your maximum grade is 3.0. A paper that is more than 48 hours late can receive no higher than a 2.0. You may turn in a late paper any time until December 13.

Computer problems are not a valid excuse for lateness. Plan ahead. Back up frequently.

GRADING

The syllabus explains the general meaning of marks on the four-point scale. The chief criteria of assessment are:

Evidence. Has textual evidence been used extensively, chosen well, and interpreted effectively in support of claims?

Motive. Does the paper make its central problem interesting?

Argument. Is the argument focused, logical, convincing, surprising?

Line of thought. Does the paper develop its ideas in connected, orderly fashion? Does the conclusion follow from (and differ from) the opening?

Style. Is the paper clearly written? Is it free from typographical, grammatical, and other errors?

IN GENERAL

An A-range (3.5–4.0) paper is strong by all these criteria; a B-range (2.5–3.5) paper has well-chosen, well-analyzed evidence but does not fully develop its argument or its motive; a C-range (1.5–2.5) paper lacks evidence or uses evidence only to summarize plot; and a D-range (0.5–1.5) paper is too short or ignores the assignment.

If you submit work that is not your own, you will not receive credit for the assignment, and you will face disciplinary consequences. See the Rutgers academic integrity policy on the website <http://academicintegrity.rutgers.edu/>.