

The Principled Essay Introduction

Introduction due Wednesday, March 3, at 12 p.m., on Sakai Assignments.

This exercise gives you a formula for the first paragraph of a short essay in literary interpretation. Good writing does not, of course, come from following formulas, but working with a new formula—one designed with the expectations of this course in mind—can help generate new thinking.

Formulate a paper topic about a single poem, following the first paper assignment. This may of course be tentative; you may eventually write the paper about another topic or another poem. Read the poem over several times on paper, marking it up with your observations. Working through this evidence, make some notes for yourself towards an argument about the topic. Choose a passage from the poem that seems particularly intriguing and important to discuss. Then write an introductory paragraph according to the following scheme:

1. In the opening sentence, introduce the passage you have chosen, contextualizing it (i.e., explain what poem it comes from and where in the poem it occurs). Then quote the passage using in-text or block quotation.
2. Briefly use the details of the quotation to set up your *motive* by observing what is problematic, interesting, and surprising about the passage.
3. In a few sentences, *forecast* the development of the paper as it might be written. This may have to be vague, but it should indicate roughly what steps of the argument you might pursue. Do not plan three separate subtopics (the “five-paragraph essay”); sketch a single argument that develops across the whole paper.
4. In a sentence or two, articulate an *argumentative thesis* that addresses your chosen topic and answers the question that motivates the paper. A strong thesis is specific, not general; it is complex rather than straightforward; and it addresses how the components of the text in question work. A weak thesis reduces a poem to a single generality (“Shakespeare says love is blind”) or makes a claim that every reader of the text would immediately agree with.

Do not worry if you are unsure how you would really prove the argument you are formulating. The point is not to have already written a whole paper, but to try to develop a motive and argument in terms of a specific passage instead of a broad generalization.

GRADING

You will receive full credit if you make a reasonable attempt to try out this formula by quoting a passage and attempting to articulate a motive and a thesis.

A late exercise can receive no more than half credit. Unlike other exercises, this one can only be turned in until March 9.