

## The First Paper

Introduction due Wednesday, February 24, at 12 p.m. on Sakai.

Paper due Friday, March 12, at 10 p.m. on Sakai.

Write an essay making an argument about a specific problem, device, or pattern in *a single poem* assigned in the course. You may find it useful to refer *concisely* to other poems, but your argument should focus on one poem, analyzing the language of the poem in detail to support your claims. Your paper should be 1500–1800 words in length, and it should be formatted according to the guidelines described under “Format” below. It is neither required nor expected that you should consult or cite any sources from off the syllabus, though you are certainly encouraged to use the *Oxford English Dictionary* to study word meanings.

A draft of an introductory paragraph is due on February 24 and will be graded separately as an exercise. More detailed directions have been distributed separately.

### TOPICS

Formulating a topic is part of the assignment. We might say that the topic of Vendler’s commentary on Shakespeare Sonnet 116 is negation and refutation in that poem. The topic of Warner’s essay on “Shiloh” is violence and redemption in Melville’s poem. Some topics that might be relevant to many poems we have read include:

*Persuasion and argument.* Many poems appear to seek to convince an addressee through argument. Consider carefully the implied situation of persuasion, the unfolding “logic” of argument, the types of language used to convince, and the way the poem’s form shapes the speaker’s discourse. Reflect on whether the speaker themselves seems entirely persuaded, and notice how the poem registers ambivalence; consider whether the argument is “successful” and whether such success actually appears desirable in the terms of the poem.

*The making of a self.* What kind of person speaks the poem? What aspects of selfhood are represented, which are implied, and which are ignored or abstracted away? What is surprising about the way a poem reveals a self, either in isolation or in relation to others. This question is *not* about the poet and their biography; it is about the representation of a person in the poem, whose relation to the biographical poet need not concern you.

*Ars poetica.* Many poems suggest conclusions about poetry, implicitly or explicitly: what it can do, what it cannot do, where it comes from, who it is for, how it works. Consider a poem's implied "art of poetry," and then analyze the degree to which a poem does or does not live up to its own aesthetic prescriptions.

*Well-wrought urns and half-acre tombs.* Many poems shift among scales, relating things that are small, local, here-and-now, to things that are big, far away, long past or still to come. What kinds of relations between the small and the large does the poem create? Think about possibilities like: miniaturization, refuge, self-aggrandizement, historical vision, privacy and publicness, domesticity and its opposite, movement and stasis. Allow the poem to provide multiple answers to the question of scale.

*Anything you can think of.* I will respond to draft introductions with guidance on your choice of topic. A good topic leads you to surprising conclusions not only about what a poem "says" but about the way it works.

## WRITING GUIDELINES

Careful, detailed analysis of textual evidence is central to a successful paper in literary studies. An effective paper on a single poem pays close attention to the words of the poem and the way they are arranged. Every body paragraph of a good paper is built around careful analysis of textual evidence. No claim about the text can be made that cannot be supported from the text. You must quote, but it is not enough simply to quote. An effective use of a quotation first introduces the quoted text, normally in less than a sentence, to explain its relevance to the argument. The quotation is then followed by *analysis*. 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 your interpretation.

Analyzing evidence requires paying close attention to the significance of individual words—often re-quoting them—and drawing out the implications of patterns in the kinds of words that have been chosen and the arrangement of sentences. Consider *what might have been said* as well as what *is* said. This sense of possibilities can be sharpened by referring briefly to other texts, or by reflecting on the assumptions that come with the genres of the text: what kind of text is it? What do we expect it do? In a paper on poetry, your interpretation of evidence *must take poetic form into account*, by noticing how sentences are spread across lines, how meter, rhyme, and stanza patterns (or their absence) create expecta-

tions, how any given passage you discuss is situated within the whole. Our study of poetic forms and devices gives you a repertoire of possibilities to look for and analyze.

Evidence supports an argument. A successful essay formulates and defends an overarching thesis statement. An effective thesis organizes everything that you have to say about the text, showing how many parts of the text contribute to an overall pattern of significance. But though a thesis statement is essential, the paper does not have an argument unless each part of the paper is clearly related to this main claim. Your sequence of paragraphs should clearly signal the *line of thinking* you want your reader to follow.

Not all arguments are equally interesting. A paper needs a *motive* or source of interest: a question or problem it seeks to resolve. If your paper argues for something that every reader of the text would immediately agree with, your argument lacks motive. In a paper on a single text that does not cite other scholars, good motives typically come by pointing out unexpected or counterintuitive patterns in the text, or problems the text raises but does not solve. Most generically, consider the question: do all the parts fit together? In many poems, considering the relation of the parts to the whole leads to interpretive questions. The argument should answer the motivating question. Many successful papers make arguments about the unexpected *coherence* of what appears incoherent, or, conversely, they seek to explain why unexpected *contradictions* emerge and cannot be resolved.

An effective argument normally takes possible objections into account. If no objections are possible, the motive is probably weak. On the other hand, convincing argumentation does not require straw men. There is no need to say what an imaginary population of “some people” think: instead, clearly point to those aspects of the text that might lead a reader to draw a different conclusion from the one you propose, then explain why that conclusion would be mistaken. The best papers show that the writer has challenged themselves to demonstrate the most complex, precise, comprehensive version of their claims.

In academic writing, unsupported generalizations are the enemy of conceptual clarity and effective argument. All of your claims should be based on evidence; statements that you do not have evidence for do not belong in your paper. There is no exception to this maxim for introductions, so don't begin your paper with a big generalization. Instead, begin by describing the aspect of the text that motivates your analysis.

## DRAFTS

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

## FORMAT

Use 1.25- to 1.5-inch margins on all sides, twelve-point serif font suitable for body text (e.g.: Garamond, Hoefler Text, Palatino, Baskerville, or, less appealingly, Cambria, Times), and line spacing between single and one-and-a-half. *Number all pages.* The paper should have your name and the date on the first page. Title your paper meaningfully. Please include a word count at the end of your paper.

Submit your paper electronically via Sakai Assignments. E-mail submissions are not acceptable. If possible, use Portable Document Format (PDF). Native word-processor formats (.doc, .docx, .pages, .odt) are a second-best alternative. All word processors are capable of producing PDF files, through either 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. A full citation is only required once, either in a first footnote or in a Work(s) Cited list. Because you have been working from handouts, you may copy over the bibliographic information for the poems from the handout, adding “class handout” at the end. Otherwise, line numbers may be given in parentheses. Remember to notate line breaks with “/” and stanza breaks with “//.” Secondary sources are not required in this paper; but 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.

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.

#### LATE POLICY

Late papers will be graded. A paper that is less than 48 hours late can receive no higher than a 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 the last day of classes.

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/>. I am eager to answer any questions you have about plagiarism and academic integrity.