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## Tips for Writing Essays

Textual analysis and research papers make up a large part of the writing you will do in the humanities. What follows is a detailed guide to this kind of writing, useful both in preparing to write and in revising your papers. If you keep any handouts from this course, I hope it is this one. While it is by no means exhaustive, it does cover nine fundamental issues that students must address in their development as college writers. These “Big Nine” will form the core of our writing goals this semester, and we can be confident that if we make progress in these nine categories we will have become significantly more successful college writers.

1) Organization/ Getting started: a plan. Taking the time to make a good plan will, not surprisingly, actually **save time!** If you take half an hour to plan your essay you will save a great deal of time when writing it (no sitting around thinking of what to say next for hours, or waffling for a page about something unconnected to your piece, or throwing ideas out in a disconnected and unstructured way), and will produce, as a result, a much better final product. Try to begin by brainstorming ideas and gathering them together in a list of points and themes you want to include in your writing. After this, order them in a sequence that seems like it might work well as a ‘map’ for writing your essay—follow it point by point, and if it goes well you will have probably avoided many problems of logical movement, transition, repetition, etc. We’ll perhaps talk about this (and model it) in class.

2) The introduction: A good introduction gets things going well. Take time to find a nice paragraph, set a good impression, and establish the tone and quality of the essay: first impressions count! Get right to the subject matter—if your subject is Hamlet’s madness, don’t bother with unimpressive general statements like:

*Shakespeare’s plays have always been viewed as the best ever.*

or:

*Throughout history Shakespeare’s The Merchant of Venice has been thought anti-Semitic.*

Instead, why not try a question:

*Despite the many aspects of anti-Semitism in Shakespeare’s The Merchant of Venice, can we really say the play itself is anti-Semitic?*

Or, as I like to, start with a relevant quotation that gets right to the subject. If my subject was memory in *Hamlet* then a nice opening line might be:

*“The quality of mercy is not strained,” claims Portia during Shylock’s trial, “And earthly power doth then show likest to God’s /When mercy seasons justice.” In this speech we see the hypocrisy of the play’s Christians most sharply, and it is this ugly spectacle that we find the strongest case against charges of Shakespeare’s anti-Semitism.*

3) Thesis Statement: Ideally your first paragraph will also contain your thesis statement—if not the first, then definitely the second. This is not a fixed rule, and more experienced writers may choose to ignore it, but we should probably follow it. After all, **your thesis is your paper**—only a slight exaggeration! Certainly, it is the motivation for your paper, the point or the purpose. Here are some key points to remember:

- I) Your thesis should not be obvious: “Hamlet appears to be suffering from melancholy” is not a thesis. “Hamlet’s ‘melancholy’ is intended to be read as part of the play’s discussion of acting” is a thesis!
- II) Your thesis should be one that people might agree with or disagree with—there should be room for argument and you should NEED to prove the claim you make in the thesis. Of the two examples given above, no one would argue with the first, but the second could have people talking. At the least, your reader will want to see that you can make a case for your point.
- III) It should be specific—avoid general phrases and words if possible. While you probably plan on elaborating later in the essay, all key information is best presented in some way early on.

*While some modern readers have tried to save The Taming of the Shrew, I argue that certain aspects of the play unambiguously condemn it.*

Note that this example doesn’t really say too much yet. Save from what? How is it condemned? Which aspects do you mean?

*Some recent readers and directors of the play have sought to present The Taming of the Shrew as nothing less than a feminist text, but this seems wishful thinking at best. They cite in particular the possibility of Kate’s resistance, but there is nothing in the final scene to suggest such resistance takes place. Indeed, the final act gives us overwhelming evidence to reject such modern revisionism.*

Note how this second example, while saying much the same thing as the first, tells us so much more and sets up the essay more exactly. This kind of precision is essential if you wish to give your essay substance.

- IV) A thesis is more than a theme. Hamlet’s madness may be a theme, but you must have an argument WITHIN that theme, like the ones we see above.
- V) Now, annoyingly, remember that one can also have too much. While the thesis must be complicated, sophisticated, it must not be too much to handle in your paper. You must set a task that is manageable. For example, in a class I once taught, students were writing about the novel *Heart of Darkness*. Several students unwisely set out to study both the novel’s main characters, Kurtz AND Marlow in a two page paper—this is too much! It’s difficult to know what too much is, but usually one can tell if one is honest about it. More really is sometimes less, after all.
- VI) State your thesis clearly—and where it is expected-- so that no one can mistake it!!!!

Okay, you say, that’s all well and good. But how can I come up with a thesis now that I know what makes a good one? Well, obviously, the best way is to fully engage the material you are working with—explore it thoroughly, *think about it*, and questions or arguments should come to you. However, sometimes that process is blocked or you simply can’t turn your curiosity into a cogent thesis. This may be the time for a more formulaic approach, what I call “Thesis generators.”

- I) As you read, look for reoccurring motifs or themes. For example, “gender.” What does the text have to say about gender? If you view the text as its own little world, what shape does gender take in that world? Is it the core of a person’s identity? Is it in anyway fluid? Develop you analysis to become a nuanced appraisal of your theme, sharpened to the point of an argument. For example, “In Shakespeare’s *Twelfth Night*, gender is seen as a mutable quality, something that can be played with and destabilized, rather than a concrete, organic ‘fact’” As you continue with your studies, compile a list of themes that may give you access

to texts: love, death, stages of life, family, work, etc.

- II) Bring to the foreground something that appears to be peripheral, a minor character or a neglected scene.
- III) Argue against a “standard” reading. So, for example, if a character seems weak and helpless, and is generally agreed to be so, look for ways in which you could make a case for his hidden strengths. This approach is difficult.
- IV) Characters rarely stay the same throughout a text, they grow, they mature, they become corrupted or redeemed, etc. Chart this progress, focusing it on a tight claim. For example, “At the beginning of the story Tom can be viewed as confident and strong, though by the end of the story his apparent successes seem to barely mask a growing sense of self doubt.”

4) Plot summary: This applies particularly to writing about literature, but even in general it is good to remember that there is a difference between ‘observing’ and ‘analyzing.’ Typically in college writing of any sort, analysis (the how?, why?, and what then? questions about things, rather than simply the what? questions) is highly prized. When writing English papers, something peculiar is asked of you: “don’t tell me the plot”. Years of conditioning have encouraged us to see plot as the most important thing about a book or film, but in the classroom other things matter as well. Imagine yourself coming out of a movie theatre with a friend. If you begin to tell your friend the plot, WHAT happened, he or she will look at you very oddly. What your friend is really interested in is your ideas about the film, not a retelling of the plot. Similarly, when writing an English essay, imagine that your reader has read the book, knows the plot very well, and wants to know what you thought about the book beneath the surface of the plot. If something happened, why is it important? Do any patterns emerge? Ask questions that address meaning rather than plot.

Something very similar can be said about summary of arguments and ideas. If you are writing about an essay you have read, you should not simply tell me what the author was arguing. So if you were writing about an essay that claimed high schools were educating children in the wrong way, it would not be enough to spend the whole essay telling me what the author argued. This would be a summary. Unless you are asked to specifically write a summary of a piece, you will want to make an argument about the argument you have read. So to stick with our example, you might decide to argue that the author’s claim—that high schools are educating children badly— is based on outdated information, or a very bad sense of what education should be, etc.

5) Quotation: One of the principle skills this kind of writing will foster is the ability to work with the writing and ideas of others—vital for the research paper, too. When writing English essays use phrases from the book often.

Instead of writing:

*Hamlet began to pretend he was mad*

Try:

*Hamlet put on an “antic disposition.”*

Integrate quotes fully into the text. Avoid something like this:

*The central problem for Raymond is that his mind is sullied with envy. “I am so, so envious of the whole world—everyone”*

In the above usage, the quote floats almost independently. It is better to “tie it into the text” like this:

*The pervasion of Raymond's all consuming envy is obvious when he claims to be "so, so envious of the whole world—everyone."*

Or try phrases such as these:

*As Raymond puts it, "...*

*As Raymond observes, "...*

*As Raymond states, "...*

Such phrases as these are useful when dealing with secondary sources in a research style paper:

*As Jonathan Marcus has observed, "there is a direct relationship between the abuse of animals and a person's ability to abuse people" (38).*

*"There is a direct relationship between the abuse of animals and a person's ability to abuse people," points out Jonathan Marcus (38).*

(Note, if I hadn't mentioned Jonathan Marcus in the sentence I would have needed to put his name in the brackets with the page number).

Use plenty of quotes. When you make a lengthy quotation follow it directly by talking about the importance of the quote, interpreting or translating its meaning for the reader. A rule of thumb might be that a block quote warrants at least a full paragraph of commentary directly after it. Be careful, too, that your quotes are relevant to the context you are putting them in (a classic mistake, especially with secondary sources)—the quotations work for you, they have a purpose in your argument, supporting points you have made.

**6) Transitions:** It is very important in any writing, from newspaper journalism to research papers, that the writing "flows"—a rather vague term which simply means that one feels like one is moving smoothly and logically in a given and controlled direction, rather than being thrown all over the place. Good direction is vital (making a detailed plan will help with this—know in which order you will treat your points BEFORE you begin writing).

Avoid jumps between paragraphs like the following:

*...And so it is that Hamlet is always questioning reality. A sense of an unknowable universe is at the heart of the play.*

*Hamlet is an actor and acting is important in the play...*

See how the theme jumps from reality to acting: in your head, as the writer, you may know the connection, but make it ANYWAY! See how much smoother the following version is:

*...And so it is that Hamlet is always questioning reality. A sense of an unknowable universe is at the heart of the play.*

*It is not surprising, then, that in a world where the real and the fake are so weakly separated, actors become metaphors for Hamlet's confusion. Hamlet is an actor and acting is important in the play...*

See how the second example uses a sentence like a piece of string to logically tie the two subjects and paragraphs together. This should be done within paragraphs too—make sure that everything is connected to what went before and what comes next. You may need to spot such problems in a second reading of your paper and fix the problems before handing in.

7) Logical cohesion: In a related point to the above material, make sure you do not contradict yourself as you write. It is very easy to say something that in truth damages one's own thesis or argument. Again, this is something that will most likely appear only in a second read through. With the last two points in mind, then, it seems wise to avoid the typical last night writing session. Your paper will be MUCH better if you can put it away for a day or two, then spot and correct mistakes before handing it in. I know that there is not always the time for this, but aim for it. At the very least, give yourself some time to read it and edit it, even if you finished it the night before. The best writers draft their work (which is why we use that method in composition classes), so try to get in the habit of seeing a "finished" product as always being unfinished—frustrating, but a grade winner!

Also, on the matter of logic, do not make sweeping statements that almost certainly are not true. Things like "Everyone believes" or "Throughout history," send off warning bells for readers

8) Style and rhythm: Vary sentence length and avoid repetition: Style is something to work on, but see how the following passage is obviously weak:

*Hamlet was melancholy. His father was dead and his mother married to his uncle. Hamlet is deeply confused because of this. Hamlet is confused as well because of other betrayals.*

All the sentences are short (not to mention the changing tense—always write in the PRESENT TENSE ("is," "knows" not "knew")). Vary sentence length so that instead of four short sentences, you have one long and one or two short:

*Hamlet is melancholy. His confusion comes from his father's death and his mother's "o'er hasty" marriage, but other betrayals add to his disorientation.*

See how this is not so "choppy" as the rapid fire action of the first example. See also how I avoided using the word "Hamlet" and "confusion" more than one, keeping the language fresh and new throughout (rather than tired repetitions).

9) Conclusions: As with your introduction, the conclusion is an important moment in the essay. Unfortunately, by the time we get there, we are anxious to put down anything that will allow us to feel we have "finished" (though as I said before, a writer is never exactly finished). It's worth making an effort for, though. View the conclusion like a sports highlights section on a news broadcast—it gives you the bits you need to know. For example, it will give you the teams (your argument), the goals (your main points), and the final score (the progress you made since you initially posed your thesis in the introduction). So, in part, the conclusion sets out the basic problem that was put forward in the introduction, recaps your main points made in the essay, and then makes a "summing up" of what direction your evidence has pointed towards—not THE answer (there probably isn't one), but YOUR tentative answer, the one which seems the most convincing to you.