

The Two-Four Page Paper

Assignment

Write a 2-4 page essay that fully develops an interesting, insightful, tightly-focused argument* that engages two texts you've read and/or talked about thus far. Your essay should provide the reader with clear support and with argumentation that fully justifies your conclusions, and it should be written in a style that is both felicitous and sophisticated. Its argument should be both complex and clear.

"I don't know what you want; I don't know what you're looking for." If by this statement you mean: "I don't know what specific content, in what specific form, you want," then the answer is: "We don't either." There is no magic formula, no single right reading, no set model for a great essay. Having said that, here's what you shouldn't do: **Don't simply repeat what was said in class.** This essay is an opportunity for you to explore your own ideas and your own thinking. **Feel free, however, to take something that was discussed in class and explain it further or expand on its implications,** using your own reading or experience for support.

The one thing you must do in your essays:

Make a connection using two texts studied – put "this and that together" – and explain both the details and the significance of that connection. (Note: one of these "texts" can be a detailed rendering of personal experience.)

Other things you can do in your essays:

- Locate yourself in a conversation (from class, from your reading, from life, etc.).
 - Agree with a writer, and extend his or her ideas with your own examples.
 - Ask a question, and then answer it.
 - Reconstruct a "light bulb moment" you had while reading.
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What you CANNOT do:

- “Disagree” with an author and go off on a rant.
- Analyze a single text.

*As Michael Palin says in the Monty Python video, an argument is “an intellectual process.” It’s “a connected series of statements intended to establish a proposition.”

How to Get Started

Go to your Journal, and find the point in your reading that engaged you the most. Note: if the point that engaged you the most was something said in class, go back to your Journal and find out what you originally said about it. If it is a point you missed or misread, look back at the work and figure out why you missed or misread it. Use the left-hand page to write down what you discover.

Look back in the text and find out what was said there that made you say what you said. Was your original analysis of the text accurate? Does it actually convey the meaning you said it does? Do you still agree with what you wrote originally? Why or why not? What would you write in your Journal now?

When you’ve settled on a statement you can live with, you need to ask yourself, **“Is this simply a statement of fact?”** (For example, does it merely repeat what is said in the text or retell an incident that occurs in the text?) **Or, does it in some way provide a commentary or present an opinion on the text?** Another way to think about this step is to ask yourself **does my argument make explicit something that I see as implicit**, either in this text or between two texts? Keep thinking about this point in the text until you can formulate an argument that provides some commentary or opinion.

Now you need to ask yourself two vital questions: What is my argument? And, why is it important?

Remember, **your essay should be an individual, not a personal, response** to the reading. You might think that Blake in *Glengarry Glen Ross* is a jerk (and he might be), but a good paper will explore why his being a jerk is important (to an idea of masculinity exemplified in another text, to Nabokov’s idea of the author as teacher, etc.). You might personally disagree with Gilbert and Gubar about the ways that women have been represented, but why is your disagreement important?

Reread the entire text and find all of the evidence that led you to this conclusion. Begin, also, to think about how and why you came to the conclusion you did. You should also look for evidence that might contradict or work against your argument.

Keep asking yourself those two vital questions: What is my argument? And, why is it important? Write and rewrite your response until you can articulate a clear answer to these questions in two or three sentences. You do not necessarily need to write these statements explicitly in your essay, but it should be clear to a reader of your essay what your argument is and why you think it is important. **Remember, if you can't clearly explain to someone exactly what your argument is (and why it's important), odds are that a reader won't know what it is either.**

Ask yourself, **"Is this an argument I can make in two to four pages?"** If not, **narrow your focus.** You probably can't say much in two pages about all of "The Queen's Looking Glass," but you might be able to develop a nice argument about Snow White in that space.

Repeat the above process until you've arrived at what you think is a workable argument with a reasonable amount of support to back it up.

Now you need to ask yourself **the most important question in writing: "Who is my audience?"** Your audience, of course, is your classmates and your teacher, and you can assume that they have read the text you're talking about but have not settled on any opinions or conclusions about it. You need to show your audience the evidence and support that led you to your conclusions, and explain how and why you came to the conclusions you did. Just because you assert something (no matter how strongly you assert it) doesn't mean that your audience will be convinced of your assertion. Just because you read a certain line in a certain way doesn't mean that your audience will read it in exactly the same way. Make sure that your argument doesn't rest on assumptions that your audience may not share or that you haven't clearly articulated. You have to **convince your audience** that your argument is a sound one.

"What is the most effective way to present my argument?" There are as many answers to this question as there are writers of essays and arguments to be argued. Still, here are some general tips:

- **Write in a style and voice that is easy, natural, and clear.** You're not a 17th century scholar; don't try and sound like one.
- **Say what you mean and mean what you say.** This might sound simple, but it's the hardest thing to make your writing do.
- **Present your argument in a clear, coherent order.** Don't jump from point to point without telling your audience where you're going.

Remember: Writing is a process. It involves thinking, reading, writing, rereading, rethinking, and rewriting. Like a work of art (which it is), it is never finished; only abandoned. It's a grueling, painful thing, especially when we have to throw away something that we've already written, but it's the only way we can really know what we think and communicate that thinking to others.

Ask yourself the following questions about your argument:

- Is your text clearly written for your intended audience, and is it clearly and consistently relevant to the context?
- Have you successfully utilized appeals (ethos, logos, pathos) in the given support for your argument?
- Does your argument attempt to answer (or at least to explore) a challenging intellectual question?
- Is the point you're making one that would generate discussion and argument, or is it one that would leave people asking, "So what?"
- Is your argument too vague? Too general? Should you focus on some more specific aspect of your topic?
- Does your argument deal directly with the topic at hand, or is it a declaration of your personal feelings?
- Does your argument indicate the direction of your essay? Does it suggest a structure for your paper?
- Does your introductory paragraph define terms important to your argument?
- Is the language in your argument vivid and clear?

If you're still having trouble getting started, go back and review the essay, **Where Do Sentences Come From?** (Where do sentences come from.pdf)

Finally, take a look at a few rules on **"How to Write"** from Colson Whitehead (see: How to Write.doc).

Scholastic Dishonesty

Turning in work that is not your own, or any other form of scholastic dishonesty, will result in a major course penalty, including possible failure of the course. Please see the Statement on Scholastic Dishonesty (Scholastic Dishonesty.pdf).

You are not expected to use any sources or research for your papers; but if you do, you must provide photocopies or printouts of all sources you use. If you have any questions about use of sources for your assignments, see your instructor before you turn in the paper. And, you may want to consult the suggestions for the Appropriate Use of Wikipedia (Using Wikipedia.pdf).