

The Seminar Paper

Your final paper is due Monday, May 25, by 12 p.m. to the graduate office and to me.

Write an article-length essay (8000–12000 words) making an argument relevant to one or more of the themes of the course. Your essay should include a serious analytic discussion of at least one text from the syllabus. Your essay should reflect critically on “modernism” in some way; i.e. do not take “the modern” for granted but reflect on your material in the context of the wider field surveyed in the course.

Your argument should engage with existing scholarship relevant to your topic. I do not expect that you will conduct a comprehensive literature review, nor that you will be able to produce publishable, original scholarship between now and the end of term. Nonetheless, you should supplement our readings in scholarship with your own secondary research.

NARRATIVE BIBLIOGRAPHY DUE MARCH 28

A brief discussion of your topic and an account of your preliminary research is due on Canvas after spring break. In approximately 500–750 words, describe your motivating questions and briefly discuss your possible uses of roughly 10 sources, including both primary sources and scholarly sources. I do not expect you to have read all these sources carefully yet. Look at enough of them sufficiently to articulate what may be significant for you to analyze (in the case of primary sources) or argue with (in the case of secondary sources). With respect to primary sources, you might even wish to write out a miniature interpretation of a passage. With respect to secondary sources, make an effort to get beyond merely citing to agree, even at this stage, and sketch out your *own* argumentative position as best you can. This bibliography is not separately graded, but I will of course give comments on ways to develop your work in progress.

SOME POSSIBLE MODELS

Interpret an object literary-historically. Choose an item from the syllabus (novel, book, magazine...) and develop an interpretive argument about it. In this course, an interpretive paper must make a serious attempt to ground its claims historically.

Author study. Choose a writer from the syllabus and read further in her or his work. Build an argument around a pattern (thematic, formal, rhetorical) in selected works by that writer, perhaps informed by a sense of the writer’s career.

Format/medium study. Consider the relationship between particular texts, authors, or subgenres and their means of production and distribution. I have in mind analyses of periodicals, publishers,

or anthologies. Think about how paratexts or material substrates structure meanings, implied audiences, and authorial position-takings.

Comparative study. Choose a framework that allows you to put multiple texts in conversation with one another: this could be a historical moment, a subgenre (one you define or one understood by contemporaries), or a shared thematic or formal motif. I strongly encourage you to focus your attentions on the early twentieth century U.S., but I do not rule out comparative work that reaches across historical periods or genres. The challenges of a comparison are more than the challenges of its parts: you have to say something convincing about each comparandum individually and you have to make the comparison itself worthwhile and meaningful.

NORMATIVE REMARKS ON THE ARTICLE GENRE

Evidence. A good article in literary studies analyzes a well-defined, thoroughly cited body of evidence. In all but exceptional cases this evidence is chiefly texts, which are quoted and subjected to interpretive analysis. The same interpretive attention you bring to literary texts should be brought to bear on “contextual,” theoretical, and other materials in non-imaginative or non-literary genres. An analysis succeeds when it convincingly accounts for the complexities of the objects under study.

Attention to detail notwithstanding, not all sources will take up the same amount of space or bear the same weight in a long essay. Think carefully about how you *select* out of the universe of possible relevant material.

Motive. Articles have reasons for being: they identify questions or problems that need addressing. Some compositionists call this the “motive” of an essay; the vernacular term in our field is the “stakes.” Ordinarily, the essay introduction has the job of explaining why your topic matters to the scholarly conversation, and why your own approach is worth pursuing. Typical motivating moves include: “it has been little noticed that...”; “contrary to most scholars’ assumption...”; “I elaborate on existing work by...” One aim of the course has been to help you develop a sense of what kinds of questions or problems are of interest, what settled views might need contestation, and so on.

Argument. Every successful scholarly essay makes a focused argument. By convention the argument should be stated plainly, quite early in the essay. The formula “In this essay, I argue that...” is a good one. A great deal of graduate-student writing does not adequately distinguish motive from argument. If your thesis is that your topic is interesting, or that it is necessary to take a certain approach to your topic, or that previous work has not considered something about your topic, you do not yet have an argument. If it seems to you that no one could conceivably disagree with your claim, you have an argument without a motive.

Structure. A full-length article may have the form of a very extended treatment of a single text, surrounded with contextualizing material, or it may take up a series of examples in turn. Either

way, longer essays break naturally into sections on subtopics, linked together more or less tightly by framing and transitional material.

Clarity. Your article should present your ideas logically, methodically, and clearly at the level of the sentence and the paragraph. It is particularly important to explain your conceptual key terms and to use them consistently. “Signposting” gestures are important in a long essay. Revise carefully with attention to the needs and expectations of your (imagined) reader. I have no patience at all for literary scholarship with artistic pretensions.

Tact. The relation between the literary scholar and the object of study is never simple: both participate in the game of culture, though the fields on which they play may be quite distant. In the case of classic modernism, literary scholarship has long been hobbled by an overidentification with its historical progenitor. In the case of popular-culture texts, it seems to me scholarship navigates between the Scylla of condescension and the Charybdis of enthusiasm, because literary scholarship, regardless of its object, is never popular culture itself, but operates at the remove created by the distance of the academic field from the field of mass media. Navigating these relationships more effectively requires historical, analytical, and self-critical tact. Consider whether your analysis has adequately done justice to what you are analyzing, what it (text, author, social formation) seeks to do and why; and at the same time, consider whether your analysis has achieved adequate critical distance from those meanings and motives you find in your objects.

FORMAT

Chicago footnote style is the best citation style (both short notes with bibliography and long notes without are equally the best). Nonetheless, if you are accustomed to MLA style, you are not required to switch over. I expect citations to be complete and consistent. Auto-generated citations (from Zotero, EndNote, etc.) always require hand-correction.

The best resource on matters of word usage is the *Merriam-Webster Dictionary of English Usage*; there is also a paperback concise edition. I do not believe in enforcing fake prescriptive rules (e.g. prohibitions on split infinitives, “but” at the start of a sentence, passive “voice,” “restrictive” which), but any transgressions against Standard Written American English should be rare and deliberate.

TYPOGRAPHY

Obviously typography is not important. Nonetheless, why not produce a good-looking printed page?

Basic level: a good typeface. Times and the Microsoft “C” family (Cambria, etc.) are not good; they were designed for other uses than setting extended print texts. Garamond is a classic “humanist” typeface that is so designed. The Mac ships with a good text face, Hoefler Text. The very nice modern face Minion Pro is found on many systems. Some people like Baskerville, though its “rationalist” style is not to my taste. Palatino is fine, even though typography snobs think the free Palatino faces betray the original essence.

Fussy level: the right file format. PDF, not Word format, is the only guarantee that someone on a different computer will see what you see on your screen. Use “Save As” in Word.

Perfectionist level: typographic niceties. Use em and en dashes, not double-hyphens and single hyphens; use typographer’s quotes, not straight quotes; use ligatures (fl, fi, ff, ffi, ffl); use a single word space after periods, not two spaces. Word’s AutoCorrect does all these for you, some of the time. Use text or “old-style” figures (1 2 3 4); unfortunately, many free fonts lack these, but there are increasingly good options out there (look for OpenType fonts). Don’t double-space or use tiny one-inch margins; these are ludicrous relics from the typewriter era. Use ampler margins, so that you have no more than ninety characters in a line, and leading like that used in nicely produced journals; probably you want only slightly more than “single” spacing.

Maniac level. andrewgoldstone.com/tex.

LARGE LANGUAGE MODELS

My course policy is that none of us should make use of the “artificial intelligence” offered by the ever-more-ubiquitous Large Language Models (ChatGPT, Claude, Gemini, Copilot, etc.). These corrupt, brittle, and environmentally disastrous systems for generating plausible text or conducting approximate search need to be set aside while we are working on developing ourselves as scholars and writers. That also means you will have to exercise extra vigilance as you go about searching digital databases for references, lest you fall victim to some “AI” intrusion in your research process. Pre-“AI” search was bad enough (“relevance”).