

First Paper Assignment

DUE ON CANVAS THURSDAY, MARCH 7, AT 10 P.M.

Write a short paper making an interpretive argument about Kipling's "The Man Who Would Be King," Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury*, or Gordimer's *July's People*. Your argument should be focused on one text, though you may touch on other fiction we have read if it serves your argument. Your essay should put your own argument in relation to at least one other *scholarly* argument we have read together (citing that argument concisely and appropriately). Our readings related to the Nobel prize can be points of reference, but that is optional. Your paper should be 1800–2400 words in length; longer papers are usually acceptable, but significantly shorter papers cannot earn a satisfactory grade.

The choice of topic is your own; part of the challenge of this assignment is designing an appropriate topic, one that is both tractable and interesting. An interesting topic is focused on a genuinely surprising or problematic dimension of your texts, allowing your argument to go beyond the obvious. The best topics address not only themes but literary form as well—not just *what the text says* but *how it says it*.

WRITING GUIDELINES

Evidence, evidence, evidence. Careful analysis of textual evidence is central to this paper. We have been modeling this mode of analysis in class. Your claims should be supported by extensive quotation, but a quote does not stand on its own; you must *analyze* what you have quoted, paying close attention to the significance of individual words, of syntactical and rhetorical patterns, of nuances and implications. Re-summarizing or paraphrasing is not analysis; it does not show your reader why the text shows what you say it does. Every analytical claim you make should be supported by concrete evidence from the text; every part of your paper should make substantive analytical claims. Unsupported generalizations are the enemy of conceptual clarity and effective argument.

Motive. Your paper must address a significant, interesting, non-obvious interpretive question: the intellectual significance of the question is the *motive* for your argument. To establish significance, your paper should indicate how your specific analysis addresses broader questions about the particular text or the particular kind of text you are discussing. References to other scholars' work are particularly useful for signaling this aspect of motive: when you cite someone else's interpretation, explain how you *extend* or *critique* that interpretation. Be sure to

give a faithful account of the other person's views before claiming to go beyond them. Even if you aren't citing someone else, you can still establish that your claims go beyond the obvious: apparent paradoxes or contradictions within the texts you analyze can also supply a motive.

Motive is usually set forth in the introduction to the paper. But *avoid writing a generalizing introduction* ("Throughout history...": no). Waste no space. Begin with the most specific and surprising piece of evidence you wish to explain, then suggest its significance and state your argument as clearly as possible.

Argument. Your essay should make a central claim, proposing an answer to your motivating questions or problems. That does not mean that every good paper resolves every problem it poses; on the contrary, good papers attend to the complexities of their subject matter. But an effective argument means your reader learns something from your analysis of your evidence. Make your reasoning clear at every step, and think carefully about alternative plausible arguments you are rejecting. The best papers show that the writer has challenged themselves to demonstrate the most complex, precise, comprehensive version of their claims.

Organization. Pay attention to the *line of thought* of your writing, the way one claim leads to the next. Think of the essay as a story you have to tell about the text you are analyzing, one with an arc from beginning to end. One of the most compelling ways to tell such a story is by thinking carefully about the *order of presentation of evidence*: indeed, you can "outline" a paper by first choosing the five or six passages that are most essential to your thinking and then deciding what sequence they should be presented in. The best sequence is rarely the sequence of the text itself; don't start at the beginning and end at the end of your text. Choose an order that makes your point. Alternatively, write a draft, then outline what you have written, then remix the outline to revise the argument into the best order of presentation. Whatever approach you choose, take care that your essay is an integrated whole, not a collection of micro-essays on only loosely collected subtopics.

DRAFTS

Plan to draft and revise. You may send me a partial or full draft 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

Your paper should have 1.5-inch left and right margins, with text in twelve-point serif font (e.g.: Garamond, Hoefler Text, Palatino, Baskerville, or, less appealingly, Cambria, Times), and between single and one-and-a-half spacing. *Number all pages.* The paper should have your name and the date on the first page. Give your paper a meaningful title.

Submit your paper electronically via the Canvas Assignments tool. E-mail submissions are not acceptable. If you wish to turn in your paper in hard copy, please contact me in advance.

Digital submissions should be in Portable Document Format (PDF) if possible. Native word-processor formats (.doc, .docx, .pages, .odt) are acceptable. All word processors can produce PDF files, through 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. All sources must be documented appropriately, either in a MLA-style in-text citation (with “Works Cited” bibliography) or in Chicago-style footnotes. Waste no space: repeated citations to a single text need nothing more than a page number in parentheses. 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. Consistency and thoroughness in citation is more important than exact fidelity to either MLA or Chicago style.

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*. For detailed information about current and past word uses, the fundamental source is the *Oxford English Dictionary*.

LATE POLICY

Late papers will be graded. If I receive your late paper less than 48 hours after the deadline, your maximum grade is 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 class meeting. (It is not a good idea to put a midterm paper off until the last class meeting.)

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. Any part of your paper that is not by you must be correctly attributed to its source; misrepresenting work written by someone else or generated with an online aid (including “AI”) as your own is plagiarism. See the Rutgers academic integrity policy on the website academicintegrity.rutgers.edu.