

First Paper Assignment

DUE FRIDAY, OCTOBER 20, AT 5 PM ON SAKAI

Your assignment is to write a focused, analytic paper making an argument about a specific problem, device, or pattern in a single text: either “The Middle Years,” “The Mark on the Wall,” “Street Haunting,” *Portrait*, or *As I Lay Dying*. The standard for papers on short texts will be higher than papers on novels. Your paper should be 1800–2400 words in length.

SUGGESTED TOPICS

Make an impression. Develop an interpretation of the significance of sensory detail in your chosen text; choose specific passages of description, or specific linguistic devices for registering perception, for your analysis. What comes to unexpected prominence, and what is pushed into the background? What sorts of skepticism or doubt does a focus on perception induce in the reader? You need not focus exclusively on sight (there are other kinds of perception). Distinguish rigorously between perceiving and knowing.

Minor role. Develop an interpretive argument about a character in Joyce or Faulkner who occupies only a small narrative space. What role does this character play in the structure and meaning of the text? How does this character work to point out particular themes? Why is the character represented only briefly? What does their “minorness” leave out of representation? It may be particularly fruitful to think about the way fictional minorness may be connected to forms of *social* marginalization.

Narrative and memory. Consider the narrative significance of memory in Joyce or Faulkner. When and how does memory enter the text: how is it narrated, and what is its narrative function? Why are events not simply narrated in order? Do not confine your claims to “character development.”

Your own highly focused topic. I will gladly give feedback on self-designed topics up to two days before the due date.

WRITING GUIDELINES

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*. To support a claim, it is not enough simply to quote; once you quote, 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. Instead of attempting to paraphrase what a text means or summarize what

it's about, *show how it works*. 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 what you say. Every analytical claim you make should be supported by concrete evidence from the text; every part of your paper should make substantive analytical claims.

You are particularly encouraged to look back over your own commonplace-book entries, as well as your classmates', to search for evidence of the patterns, recurring themes, or insistent problems that you might write about.

Your paper must address a significant, interesting, non-obvious question about one of the texts, and it must propose a clearly articulated, non-simplistic answer to that question. The question does not have to be a literal question; but successful papers always have a strong, focused *motive* for the particular analysis they carry out. Think about how your *highly specific* claims connect to broader questions about the author, genre, or theme your paper discusses, and how following your interpretation changes how readers should think about these questions. In order to find a motive in this sort of single-text assignment, think about what is most surprising about what you have to say. You may take for granted that your reader has in mind what has been discussed in class. (That also means that you should not repeat material from class. Spending too much of your paper on material or arguments already extensively discussed in class will weaken your motive.)

Motive is often established at the start of an essay. *Avoid writing a generalizing introduction*. Begin your essay with a surprising piece of evidence or observation of your own that immediately frames the topic you are going to address and establishes its interest. Then move from motive to argument: expanding on that initial piece of evidence, forecast the terms of your argument, then state the central, argumentative claim of the essay.

Your argument should answer your motivating question. 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. It will help to ask yourself what alternative arguments someone might make about your topic and to anticipate objections to your claims.

Think carefully about the *line of thought* of your writing, the way one claim leads to the next. "Transition sentences" are less important than your sense of the overall logic of your argument: 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.

DRAFTS

Plan to draft and revise. You may send me partial or full drafts for brief comments, as long as you do so at least two 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 Sakai 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 a second-best alternative. 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. In a paper on a single text, you may give a full citation only once, either in an MLA-style "Work Cited" bibliography or in a Chicago-style footnote to the first quotation. After that, page numbers may be given in parentheses. 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. 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*, 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*.

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 December 13.

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/>.