

## Final Essay Guidelines

English 307: Spring 2020

Hi class. The final writing assignment for this course will be an 8-10 page research paper. Your midterm essay will function as a draft of this final paper. Ideally you will have a full 8-10 page draft to submit for your midterm, but this is not demanded. What you should have, however, for your midterm is a research question and a thesis statement/argument that incorporates at least three academic sources. This means that you will need at least the first 4-5 pages of your research paper drafted. Please review my comments and suggestions for the midterm before embarking on the final draft of your essay. I advise looking at some scholarly materials on your subject before beginning writing. However, some writers prefer to begin with a close reading of a text and then look at sources to augment your ideas about the text. Either approach is fine but the purpose of this assignment is to build rhetorical context and put your ideas into dialogue with other authors. Dialogue, however, does not necessarily mean straight agreement or disagreement. Besides agreeing and disagreeing there are myriad ways to enact a critical dialogue: echoing, building upon, pivoting, reexamining, elaborating, etc. The scholarly sources are there to help you make *your* point, not to dictate the terms of your paper. Try to be confident with your own argument, and don't worry about being "original"; whatever you write will be original because it will be in your own voice. **Each paper should quote directly from at least three secondary sources.** Remember, too, that what matters is not what your sources say, or that they necessarily complement your point/s, but how those sources function in your analysis/discussion. In other words, how you *use* those sources to dialogically advance your thesis will determine the way in which you use those sources, which means that some of your sources may not even be about your topic. For example, if I am examining Poe's representation of women in one or more of his works, I may consult a source on feminism and gender theory that nowhere mentions Edgar Allan Poe. This kind of text, then, would be used to build a working theory or concept of feminist critique that then gets applied to an analysis of Poe. What sources you use always depends on how they function in your paper and what purpose they serve in helping you advance and unpack your argument. Also remember to use primary textual evidence for the claims you are making. No matter what your argument is, it should be grounded in textual evidence. It's always good to point to specific passages from the text and to dwell on and explicate those passages in your analysis. We often assume that the point we're making is clear and/or "obvious." But often it is not obvious to the reader but obvious to *you* because it is your idea. Rather than assuming that what you're saying only needs a sentence or two, take your time to explain and draw out your points when you make them. Doing so will give you a stronger, more analytically rich paper. You are welcome to write about more than one author, but I recommend not writing about more than two, considering the length of the paper (8-10 pages is actually not that long) and considering the fact that bringing two authors together in a paper can be a difficult task and that its success depends very much on your research question and argument. For those of you who are planning on becoming, or already are, teachers, you are welcome to experiment with an assignment plan and rationale instead of a traditional research paper, especially if you are planning on teaching one of these works to future middle school or high school students. If you're interested in this kind of project, come talk to me to work out the details.

## Assignment Requirements

For this essay, please select an author and text (or texts, if you're writing about a cluster of poems), formulate an argumentative thesis about that text, and then unpack that thesis throughout the remainder of the paper by using primary textual evidence and at least three scholarly sources (i.e. academic articles and/or book chapters). Please note: I am open to you writing about texts we haven't read this semester by authors we have read (for example: Emerson's "Divinity School Address"), but I ask that you clear them with me first, in person or via email.

Your essay must be **8 pages in length and no more than 10 pages**, double spaced and formatted according to MLA (times new roman 12-point font with one-inch margins). Though you are required to use a minimum of **three academic sources**, you are welcome to use more if you would like and you can also use non-academic sources (for example, an article from *The New Yorker*, YouTube videos, Wikipedia) so long as those sources are in addition to the three required academic sources. I recommend searching the Project Muse and Jstor databases (on the Hunter Library website) as well as Google Scholar (only if it's used through the Hunter Library website, so you can avoid paying for access). I expect that you will quote at least once (if not more) from each academic source you use. That said, do not feel like you must over-quote. Do whatever best serves your argument. Also, I recommend looking for sources written no earlier than 15 to 20 years ago. When you get much earlier than that (again, older scholarship can certainly be good, relevant work) points of view become very limited and, in some cases, simply out of date.

### A Bit More on Thesis Statements...

Your essay must have a locatable thesis statement. A literature thesis, generally, is an interpretive claim. This claim should be argumentative (that is, not a factual observation about the text). More often than not, stronger theses *demonstrate* the thinking behind their conclusions. Let's take a look at an example. Consider the following (potential) thesis:

"Anne Bradstreet's poems are proto-feminist."

This is certainly an argument; a reader of your essay could easily find room for disagreement (and critics do disagree on this point). However, this example does not in any way *demonstrate* its thinking. Consider this revised thesis:

"Anne Bradstreet's poems are proto-feminist in that they challenge patriarchal conventions—both in literature and civil society—by presenting an ironic, self-referential authorial persona who is clearly able to perform the literary tasks she claims she is unable to perform."

Notice the difference. The second example makes the same argument but does so demonstratively, that is, with argumentative/analytical support. A good way to test your argument is to write it and down and put "because" and try to finish the sentence. If you're having trouble finishing the sentence, you might not have figured out your argument. Again, there is no one right way to achieve a thesis/argument; this is one method you can try.

Another way to help you develop your thesis is to underline it after you finish your first draft. This method helps you identify your argument, pay closer attention to it, and revise it accordingly. Generally, theses occur at the end of the first or second paragraph of shorter essays such as this one, so if you notice that your strongest thesis statement is at the end of your draft, or somewhere in the middle, move it to the beginning and revise your draft accordingly.

Your paper also must have a title. Titles correlate to your paper's topic and argument. Your paper shouldn't, for example, be titled "Ann Bradstreet" or "Midterm Essay." Instead, your title should be something like: "Ann Bradstreet's Proto-Feminism." Below you will find a list of prompts (which can also be used for your final paper). You are welcome to use, modify, combine, or ignore these prompts; they exist only to help you if you need some direction.

### **Possible Topics**

--What does Jonathan Edwards mean by what he calls a "sense of the heart"? Do a close reading of "Sense of the Heart," otherwise known as Miscellany 782, and consider what Edwards' argument is and how it departs from Locke's empiricism, as Miller details in his introduction.

--How is "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God" an example of the American jeremiad? I recommend looking at David Howard-Pitney's essay "The Afro-American Jeremiad" (on Blackboard) to get a very concise summary of the jeremiad and use this to analyze Edwards. If this is a research paper, you might consider how the jeremiad functions in American popular culture and society today.

--How is Emerson's concept of self-reliance a mode of cultural and political critique? How does it relate to, or manifest as a version of, the jeremiad? If this is a research paper, you might look into Emerson and rhetoric, the jeremiad, and/or scholarship specifically on "Self-Reliance." You could easily do this same thing with "Circles."

--What is the role of sound and rhetoric in Emerson? How does the spoken word come (literally) to matter in Emerson? Check out Joan Richardson's essay "Emerson's Sound Effects" on Blackboard to give you background and see what other scholars have recently said regarding Emerson and sound or Emerson and rhetoric.

--How does Anne Bradstreet represent herself as a female poet? How does she counter Puritan society's patriarchal marginalization of female authorship and of women in general? Close read one or more of Bradstreet's poems and develop an argument about that poem in relation to her authorial persona/personae. If this is a research paper, you may look up what critics have said about her feminism and her conformity to Puritan norms. Many have debated this issue and you could easily position your argument within the (highly contested) context of that conversation.

--How does Emily Dickinson challenge patriarchal norms in one or more of her poems? How does her use of language, metaphor, and her general poetic style and tone accomplish this? You may consider, for example, how irony and ambiguity operate in her poetry.

--What does Dickinson's poem "The Brain is Wider than the Sky" suggest about the mind in relation to the physical world? How does "God" fit into this poem and what does "God" even mean? You might also consider the poem "I Heard a Fly Buzz When I Died." How does this poem represent death and the transition from life to death? What anxieties about immortality and religion does the poem suggest? How does the poem interestingly and productively juxtapose the particular and contingent with the universal and the eternal?

--Analyze and reflect on the meaning of "Because I Could Not Stop for Death." How is this poem similar to, and possibly different from, Dickinson's other poems? How is death represented?

--How does Phillis Wheatley negotiate being both a female author and a slave in her poetry? Wheatley was kidnapped and sold into slavery in West Africa when she was seven years old. Yet she was taught to read and allowed to write by her slave masters in Boston, who encouraged her talents, and her poetry was well read and praised by the likes of George Washington. Thus, Wheatley's identity is full of contradictions and complications. How do these antinomies get represented in the poetry and how do they come to shape her poetic voice/identity?

--How does Benjamin Franklin's *Autobiography* function as an ideological text? How does it represent and transmit the values of liberalism and the enlightenment? How does Olaudah Equiano's autobiography do the same? Consider consulting Lisa Lowe's article on Equiano to write about either Equiano or Franklin, or even to compare the two texts.

--What is Poe's theory of literature in "Philosophy of Composition"? How does this theory relate to any of Poe's stories and poems? You can focus your analysis on more than one work, or you can focus solely on Poe's essay.

--How are any of Poe's works an example of the gothic as a genre? Consider the article (on blackboard) on Poe and the gothic and let that inform your analysis; or, if this is a research paper, incorporate it into your essay.

--Consider Hawthorne's "Young Goodman Brown" in the context of Melville's "Hawthorne and His Mosses." What does Melville mean by Hawthorne's "Puritan Blackness"? Trace that concept in Hawthorne's writing.

--Consider David-Howard Pitney's notion of the Afro-American jeremiad in relation to either Douglass or Thoreau. How do these works of literature enact their own forms of the jeremiad in relation to the moral and political crisis of slavery?

--Do a research project on John Brown which places one of the authors we've read (Emerson, Thoreau, Douglass, etc.) in the historical context of John Brown's raid on Harper's Ferry and his eventual execution. You might start with the work of literary historian and scholar David S. Reynolds whose book on Brown is called *John Brown, Abolitionist*.