Advice on Writing and Revising Critical Essays

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PART ONE: PRESENTING AN ARGUMENT

A. HAVE AN ARGUMENT TO MAKE.

This is the single most important thing you need to write a good paper for this class. A college paper is not (only) a way of proving you did the work, read the book, came to class, know the stuff. It is a way of making the material of the course your own by entering into a vital and substantive discussion and debate of it.

The main argument of your paper is known as the THESIS. How do you come up with a good thesis? The truth is that there is no magical formula for producing good theses--everyone has their own process. Sometimes students find it helpful to begin with "freewriting" --writing as fast as possible without editing everything that comes into your head related to the topic. Others may find it easier to do this kind of preliminary playing with a topic in their heads while walking around the campus. Some people may start with a preliminary thesis they know is not yet adequate, trusting the writing and revision process to hone their thinking. If at all possible (and sometimes it isn't) find a way to care about what you're writing about. Nothing sharpens every aspect of your writing like a burning desire to get something particular said about your subject. So if there is something that particularly intrigued, puzzled, or bothered you about the text (or perhaps your class's response to it), try using that as a starting point for developing a thesis.

One way of testing and refining a potential thesis is to think of the rest of the class as your audience. If what you are thinking of arguing seems like something they would find obvious, it's a bad thesis. Nor should your argument be controversial just for the sake of controversy--it's hard to make a compelling argument to your class if you don't actually find it compelling yourself! High school teachers are sometimes so starved for signs of independent thought that they reward loopy theses as "original." In college, arguments are expected to hold water.

Usually your thesis will be presented in the opening paragraph of your essay. If you are anxious about your ideas, you may be tempted to defer the thesis statement until the conclusion--after you've "proved" it . This is almost always a bad idea. Most of the time it is best to use the opening of the paper to articulate the thesis of the paper as clearly and succinctly as possible. Since the process of gathering textual evidence and writing the essay usually complicates or alters the idea you started out with (as it should!), it is usually advisable to plan to rewrite your introduction after you have finished a good draft of the whole essay.

B. THROW AWAY ANY RIGID PAPERWRITING FORMULAS YOU MAY HAVE LEARNED IN HIGH SCHOOL

Examples include the Five Paragraph Essay and (my least favorite) the Funnel Opening. Five paragraphs is rarely adequate for a full-length college essay and funnel openings are an actively

bad idea, to be avoided at all costs. (If you don't know what either of these are, good.) Any other similar formulas are probably similary useless. You may also have been drilled in the virtues of Making an Outline First and Sticking To It. Outlining works well for some students, for some papers --particularly when there are large amounts of data to be sorted and presented, as in a research paper. For others, it is counterproductive, as it actually gets in the way of the radical rethinking and restructuring that a first draft may require to become an excellent paper. Sometimes outlining is useful at a later stage in paper writing, after you've gotten onto paper a bunch of things you know you want to say, but aren't sure yet what order to say them in. Sometimes a "flow chart" of transitional sentences, showing how you will get from one sub-topic to another in your essay, is more useful than an outline.

C. BE PREPARED TO REVISE YOUR PAPER THOROUGHLY

1. Revise your thesis and structure

A first draft is very often a way of finding out what you actually want to argue. Once you've arrived there, you need to go back and figure out what is the best strategy for presenting the argument you want to make--which may bear little resemblance to what you have already written. For example, the account of the thesis in the opening paragraph may no longer correspond to where the paper winds up. Or much of the paper may be devoted to working through issues that, while useful in helping the writer to **reach** his or her conclusions, are not effective as a way of **arguing** for that conclusion. **Thorough, and, when necessary, radical revision is what distinguishes good, experienced writers from poor ones.** To revise properly, you have to be willing, if necessary, to throw away big chunks of what you've written and/or to completely restructure what you have. Students who are preoccupied with getting out the requisite # of pages or words will find that hard to do. Students who are writing at the last minute will lack time to do it. Do what it takes to give yourself the time and motivation to revise. One friend of mine, when she has completed a rough draft and is ready for the revision stage, prints out hard copy of the essay and then actually deletes the original computer file. Since she will now be entering the entire revised text from scratch, she has less subconscious incentive to retain prose she's already written in the revised version, so she's willing to revise more radically. Others (like me) work by "looping"--going back and revising earlier portions of an essay for both style and substance, every time a new step is taken in drafting the argument, so that revision provides a kind of "break" from the labor of drafting, and vice versa.

2. Check your transitions.

Strong transitions are a large part of what makes a good paper good, because they express the relationships between subsidiary ideas. The usual (though not the only) position for a transitional sentence is at the beginning of a new paragraph, so that's the place to look first if you want to check the quality of transitions on a draft. A good transition both makes a substantial claim relevant to the argument of your paper and links that claim to what you've already said. If you find yourself relying on additive terms (and, also, another, the second reason, the third point, etc.) or on sequential ones (what happens next is...) to make transitions, you probably need to make more precise logical connections between your points: is one a result or a cause of the other? is one a generalization and the other a special case or exception to it? etc. Weak or sloppy transitions are often a sign that you haven't thought through your ideas and organization fully

enough, so focusing on them will strengthen the substance as well as the presentation of your essay.

3. Remove clutter from your prose.
Your main task in revising a rough draft, as explained above, is to develop, sharpen and structure your argument. What you may not realize is that improving the quality of your prose style can actually help you in that process, as well producing a finished product that will make a much stronger impression on any audience. So be prepared to revise strenuously for clarity and concision. Your mantra throughout this process should be: *Cut to the chase*. Below are some common bad prose habits to watch out for. As you trim away unnecessary clutter from your prose, you should find the lines of your argument emerging more clearly for you as well as your reader. If, on the contrary, you find that nothing much remains, it's clearly time to return to **A** above.

a. Metadiscourse: Metadiscourse is characterized by reference to the author and/or the reader and/or yourself. Examples:

In this scene, Austen conveys the idea that
In this scene, the reader realizes that
In this scene, I could see that
What seemed to me important about this scene was that

Metadiscourse can easily pile up, as in: "I think that the author means to convey to the reader the idea that...." It rarely adds anything to your prose except extra words, and can become a bad habit. Students often turn to metadiscourse because they feel they need to indicate that what they write is "just my opinion." But it goes without saying that what you offer in an essay is your own view, which will be judged not by that fact but by how well it is supported by sound argumentation and pertinent evidence. Metadiscourse can also creep in as part of the process of "talking through" your own reading process, i.e. "This character was hard for me to understand," or "After one thinks about this for a while, it becomes clear what the author really means." In revision, all this stuff needs to go.

To check for metadiscourse, examine subjects and verbs first (see underlining in the examples above), to see whether they refer to author, reader or self. By omitting metadiscourse, you not only get rid of wordiness, you also recaim your main subject and verb for more substantive uses: "Wentworth's speech here evokes/ reveals/ symbolizes/ parallels/ foreshadows/ suggests/ problematizes (etc.)"

b. Author flattery: A pet peeve. This is where the writer uses words like wonderful, exciting, excellent, compelling, etc. to show how much he/she liked the work or a particular aspect of it—often *instead of* actually making an argument about it. Author flattery, like other kinds, tends to sound insincere even when it's not. If you really loved the work, prove it through the intelligence and depth of your engagement with it.

c. Filler sentences: Every sentence in your paper should be advancing your argument, whether by presenting your thesis, introducing subsidiary points, explaining logical relationships between points, presenting and explaining textual evidence, or drawing conclusions. Anything else is filler. Some particularly common types of filler sentences include:

i. Big generalizations about life, death, true love, human nature, history, literature, etc. Introductions are especially prone to this: please, please, never begin a paper with the words, "Throughout history…"

ii. General instructions on how to read, i.e. "When we look at a poem/story/play, it's important to pay attention to x,y,z,."--instead of telling your audience what one needs to do in general, just do it to the text at hand.

iii. Metadiscourse and/or author flattery can also combine to form complete filler sentences, i.e. "Finally, I understood how brilliant this author's strategy really was."

iv. Excessive quotations, paraphrases, and summaries from the text(s) you are writing about. See **Part Two** below.

4. Check your sentence structure

The more you write, the more you will develop your own prose style, with distinctive patterns of sentence length and structure. This is fine. But along the way, here are a few bad habits to watch out for:

a. Lots and lots of simple subject-verb-object sentences in a row: Though a few such sentences can be useful to punctuate longer ones, long strings of them tend to sound simpleminded, and the repetition of subjects and verbs leads to excess verbiage. It is also difficult to make a sophisticated argument using simple sentences. If you spot a long sequence of simple, short sentences during revision, try use subordinate and coordinate clauses to link sentences together by relating their ideas to one another (see **I.C.2** above).

b. Spaghetti sentences: At the opposite extreme, some writers try to get all the points that are related to one another into one big sentence, resulting in confusing or meandering verbal tangles. A few very long sentences CAN be effective in an argument, but only if they are carefully structured so that their overall logic is clear from beginning to end. If you have sentences that are longer than 2 or 3 lines, check their logic and structure carefully. Try splitting them up, and see if you gain more than you lose. If most of your prose is made up of very long sentences, even if they are carefully structured, you might want to try splitting some up just to give your reader a break.

5. A word about big words

It is a fine thing to have a large active vocabulary. The more words you know how to use, the more precisely you can express yourself, and precision always makes a good impression. But nothing is gained by simply substituting long, obscure words for short, familiar ones--like "pulchertudinous" for "beautiful." As a general rule, steer clear of deploying new words you only know from vocabulary drills for the SATs, or found in a thesaurus: if you haven't become familiar with their connotations by reading or hearing them used in a larger context, you probably won't be able to use them effectively, and you may just wind up looking silly.

6. Conclusions about conclusions

Really good conclusions are tough for everybody, even experienced writers. In a short paper, it may be best to have a concluding sentence rather than an entire concluding paragraph--better a slightly abrupt finish than a boring word-for-word repetition of your thesis a mere 3 or 4 pages after you made it. Even in a longer paper, try to avoid the old "say that you've said it" formula, or at least liven it up with an elaboration or wrinkle on the way the thesis is formulated in the intro--one that is warranted by what you've said in the paper, of course! Sometimes it is useful to save up a particularly apt quotation, or a sharp or witty formulation of your own, to give some kick to your conclusion--but, again, make sure it's actually related to the thesis. However you write your conclusion, please don't begin it with "In conclusion. . ., " which is a dreadful cliché.

PART TWO: USING TEXTUAL EVIDENCE

A. ADVICE

You should be drawing on textual evidence, in the form of quotations, paraphrases and summaries, throughout your essay to ground the observations you are making. But it is easy to let the "evidence" take over the paper. **Data from the text should always be in service of a point <u>you</u> want to make**. To help ensure that it is:

1. Avoid sentences composed entirely of a quotation or of factual material from the text. Integrate evidence into a sentence which makes an interpretive point about it. Instead of writing "Darcy proposes to Elizabeth, which makes her mad," you might write, "Darcy's proposal and Elizabeth's angry response to it reveal/resolve/allow/provoke such-and-such." The distinction between summary and interpretation is not always obvious (which category would "Mr. Bennet learns that laughing at his family instead of correcting it has serious consequences" fall into?), but if too much of your paper falls on the borderline, the chances are that the ideas are not very well-developed or interesting.

2. Don't reiterate the obvious.
The hypothetical audience of your paper is a fellow-member of the class: that is, someone who has read the work, though not necessarily with the same attention and interests as you have. You don't need to remind them of major plot elements, but you will need to call their attention to details. Again, this is a distinction of degree rather than of kind--you have to use your judgement.

•If you follow A1 and A2 religiously, you will avoid the most common feature of poor essays on fiction: long stretches of plot summary devoid of substantive interpretive points. (For the most common feature of poor essays on poetry, see II.C below.)

3. Don't quote more than you need to make your points. If you include a long indented quote, it should be because you plan to talk in detail about that passage. There are a variety of tricks for trimming quotes to meet your needs:

a. ... and **....** Use ellipses to mark where you have left something out in the middle of the quote (*not* at the beginning or end of a quote), three dots if you've left something out mid-sentence and four if the omitted portion includes the end of a sentence. Obviously, you are not to leave anything out that would substantially alter the sense of what you include: the idea is to shorten and focus, not to distort.

b. [ ] Square brackets are used to enclose words that have been added or altered in form, usually to make the quotation fit grammatically into your sentence (by changing a pronoun or a verb tense, or adding a verb) or to include information, like the referent of a pronoun, which is not obvious once the quote is taken out of context. Example: "'I declare, Anne, [Captain Benwick] never talks of you at all'" (124). If trimming a quote will alter its grammatical structure, you can use words in square brackets to ensure that it still makes grammatical sense. Again, trimming or grammatically adjusting quotes should be done in a way that doesn't substantially alter their sense.

B. THE RULES

1. Parenthetical references: In this class, quotations from the designated edition of assigned texts need not be footnoted or specified other than by the page number for prose or the line number for poetry, in parentheses. The number reference comes after the closing quotation mark and before any punctuation: "Charles laughed again" (124). If you are writing on more than one text and it is not obvious from the context which you are referring to, include the author's last name in the parentheses (Austen, 124). If you are writing on more than one text by the same author, use a shorted or abbreviated version of the title instead of the author's name (PP, 124). If you are using a different text or edition, footnote it the first time you quote from it and then move to the system above.
2. Quoting poetry: For quotations from poetry of less than 7 lines, run the lines together, marking the line breaks with / marks and reproducing initial capitals. Indicate the range of lines in your reference: i.e. "Think not for this, however, the poor treason/ Of my stout blood" (9-10).
3. Long quotations: If you **really** need to quote more than 7 consecutive lines of poetry or prose (about which see **II.A.3** above), start a new line, indent the quotation and omit quotation marks. Include the paranthetical reference **after** any closing punctuation at the end of the quote: i.e.

> Charles laughted again. (Austen, 124)

4. Quotations and grammar: Make sure that quotations are grammatically integrated into your sentences. To check, read through the sentence without the quotation marks. If it doesn't make sense as an English sentence, you need to fiddle with it (see **II.A.3.b** above).

C. A SPECIAL NOTE ON WRITING ABOUT POETRY

Most poetry in English--and nearly all that was written before the mid-20th century--is composed of recognizable English sentences. The beginnings and endings of those sentences, or of the clauses and phrases that compose them, may or may not correspond to the line breaks of the poem. When they do, the line is said to be **end-stopped**. When the line break does not correspond to a grammatical unit of sense, the line is said to be **enjambed.** In reading a poem, if you fail to read complete sentences **as** sentences--if, for example, you treat each **line** of an enjambed **sentence** as a completely separate grammatical unit--you can very quickly derail your ability to read or write about a poem coherently. This may sound obvious, but it is astonishing how often students go astray this way. For example, the sestet of Edna St. Vincent Millay's sonnet, "I being born a woman and distressed," opens as follows:

Think not for this, however, the poor treason
Of my stout blood against my staggering brain,
I will remember you with love, or season
My scorn with pity.

More students than I care to remember of have taken the last two of these lines as a separate sentence, not noticing that they are actually part of a longer sentence beginning "Think not. . ." In other words, they see the speaker as asserting (confusingly, given the rest of the poem) that she **will** remember the listener "with love" when in fact she is telling him **exactly the opposite.** In the case of the free verse style of some poems, in which line breaks may be used to isolate single words or short phrases on their own, students will sometimes treat these lines as if they are completely free of any larger grammatical context, when in fact they are, again, parts of longer sentences. The isolation of them in separate lines may invite the reader to set them to some degree apart from their context, but their inclusion within sentences also pulls the other way. Students who respond to one pull and fail to notice the other are liable to have their readings pulled, well, askew.

This is not to say that you should simply ignore line breaks in interpreting a poem. The choice of where to break a line, the way short or long lines look on the page, the creation of varying kinds and degrees of consonance or tension between grammatical units of sense and the lines of a poem, these are tools a poet uses in his or her craft, and they may be used in subtle and complex ways. But you will not be in a position to appreciate those subtleties if you have not noticed the sentences that make up the poem to begin with. As a general rule, you should assume that a poem is in complete sentences unless it is very clear that it is not. If the poem is heavily enjambed and you are finding the line breaks confusing, you might try actually retyping the poem without the line breaks (i.e. as prose), or with each **sentence** on a separate line. Remember that older poems usually capitalize the first word of a new line, regardless of where it falls in a sentence, so ignore those capitals in decoding sentences. Add a comma or two if there are obviously some missing, but faithfully retain any punctuation that is already there. Once you have the basic sense of the sentences down, you should of course go back to studying the poem as written. But remember: the basic denotative sense of those sentences should be the **foundation** of whatever argument you subsequently make about the poem. As with a house, there may be all kinds of strange and surprising things built on that foundation, but arguments that lack it are unlikely to hold up well.

PART THREE: GRADING CRITERIA

The following are general guidelines I use in evaluating papers. Excellent writing reflects not only intelligent and independent thought, but also elegance of presentation and style. I therefore look not only for good ideas, but also at the care with which you express those ideas.

A to A+: Excellent papers, that are highly successful in uniting compelling broad claims about the text(s), graceful writing, careful argumentation, and close attentiveness to textual detail. The ideas in the paper are thought-provoking, with arguments ranging substantially outside or beyond the views and material discussed in class. The thesis is well-defined and appropriately limited and all claims are supported appropriately by evidence. "A" papers also have sound organization, few or no mechanical mistakes (including typos and spelling errors), coherent and unified paragraphs, good transitions, unambiguous sentences, and appropriate diction. An "A+" paper combines with the characteristics of an "A" paper a startling freshness of view and depth of insight. "A" quality papers will frequently turn out to be longer than the assigned length, simply because they need the space to develop a more complex argument, but they are by no means invariably so, nor will excess length *in itself* push up your grade.

A-: Very fine papers that are less successful in uniting all the elements of an "A" paper, but that nonetheless stand out as making a particularly interesting, clear and graceful argument, which is both grounded in a close attentiveness to detail and pushing, with good success, toward a higher level of generality and broader claims about the text(s).They may be somewhat weaker stylistically, organizationally *or* argumentatively than an "A" paper, but reveal as high a quality of thought, or they may be intelligent and beautifully presented papers that yet do not feel quite sophisticated enough to warrant an "A".

B+: Good, well-written papers, that meet my reasonable expectations for competent work in this course. The paper should have a clear, coherent, and substantial point or set of points to make about the text or texts, and should support it effectively with appropriate textual evidence. There may be minor mechanical errors and stylistic or organizational lapses, but no major ones. Such papers may originate in arguments and interpretations made in class, but they should also give evidence of thoughtful individual engagement with the text, which develops or complicates that material.

B: Papers that show a thoughtful but not entirely successful effort to make an interesting argument about the material at hand. It might be an intelligent paper that is awkwardly written or has local problems in logic or use of evidence, or a competently written paper with an interesting but not fully developed thesis. A mechanically competent but rather boring paper might also fall into this category.

B-: Papers that are less competent than a "B" both in content and presentation. They may have good ideas and aims but run into problems in working them out, or seem somewhat sloppy or lazy in developing them.

C+ to C-: Papers that do set out to argue something relevant to the text(s), but in which the evidence offered does not support the argument, or the argument itself is illogical in some way or displays some confusion about the text(s); or papers that do little more than summarize material from the lectures, or papers with major grammatical and/or organizational problems, e.g. many minor and some major mechanical errors, organization that rambles or disappears, diction that is inconsistent and/or words that are misused. C-range papers, in other words, have a recognizable argument but reveal serious shortcomings, in logic and/or presentation, in turning it into an effective paper. Where a paper falls in the C-range will depend partly on the degree and number of problems, but mostly on the apparent intellectual seriousness of the project. A C- paper would be one in which the ideas seem unduly casual, trivial or obvious.

D+ to D-: Papers with little or no recognizable argument (i.e. ones that simply recount the plot of a story without making analytical claims), or ones that make it clear that the writer has not read the text(s), or not read it recently or attentively enough to draw on it accurately.The paper may also have major mechanical problems, poor organization, and/or serious misreadings or misunderstandings of course material. The writer really has no point to make and has serious problems writing at an appropriate level.

F: Problems even more severe than those of a "D" paper; the paper is clearly only a token effort and/or is much shorter than the assigned length. Or the paper is plagiarized in part or as a whole. For guidelines on what constitutes plagiarism, see the Williams Honors Code. If you have any questions about what constitutes proper attribution, please ask.