**Writing Tips**

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## I. Mechanics

NOTE: papers with mechanical errors—spelling, punctuation, grammar, etc.—will be returned for corrections before being read for content. I will mark *where* the errors are. *You* will figure out *what* they are and will have two days to fix them and re-submit. If I have to return the paper to you a second time, it will mean a mark-down in your grade. There's really no reason not to get this part of paper-writing correct. If you have questions or problems, consult a good grammar book.

1. Give your paper a TITLE that indicates what you are writing about.

2. NUMBER YOUR PAGES

3. DOUBLE SPACE your paper with ample (1") margins all around

4. SPELL AND PUNCTUATE correctly

5. Cite the text(s) accurately. You do not need FOOTNOTES for a short paper in which you are citing only the primary texts assigned in class. Simply give the act, scene, and line numbers in parentheses after your quote: **(I.iii.35-38)**. If you're talking about more than one play, and it's not clear which play you're quoting from, include an abbreviated title: **(*Ham* I.iii.35-38)**. Do not write out "act," "scene," "line," etc. It just wastes space.

6. For SHORT QUOTES (three lines or less), include the quote in your text and use slashes to indicate line breaks:

   **Polonius reveals more about himself than he does about Hamlet when he tells Ophelia, "I do know, / When the blood burns, how prodigal the soul / Lends the tongue vows" (I.iii.115-17).** Please note punctuation here: unless your quote ends with a question mark or an exclamation, you don't put any punctuation inside the final quotation mark. (If your quote ends with a period or comma, you simply omit it.) The period goes AFTER your source citation at the end of your sentence.

   Do not use ellipses unless you *need* to signal to your reader that you've left something out:

   **Polonius reveals more about himself than he does about Hamlet when he tells her, "I do know, / . . . how prodigal the soul / Lends the tongue vows" (I.iii.115-17).** Ellipses here indicate that you've left out something in the middle of this quote. If you didn't use them you would be misrepresenting the text. You don't usually need them at the beginnings or ends of quotes, but see the next example.

7. For LONG QUOTES (four lines or more), set the quote off from your text and do not use quotation marks. Arrange the lines exactly as in the book.

**Polonius reveals more about himself than he does about Hamlet when he tells Ophelia:**

> **. . . I do know,**
> **When the blood burns, how prodigal the soul**
> **Lends the tongue vows. These blazes, daughter,**
> **Giving more light than heat, extinct in both**
> **Even in their promise, as it is a-making,**
> **You must not take for fire.**
> **(I.iii.115-20)**

You need ellipses at the beginning of the quote here to indicate that there is more to line 115 than you are quoting. It doesn't matter in the example in #6, but when you set the lines off in poetry as here, it does matter. Note that punctuation is different when the quote is set off from the text. You DO put a period at the end of the quote, but nothing after the source citation.

## Writing Tips II: Content

1. **NATURE OF LITERARY ANALYSIS**. Remember above all that no matter what the abstract subject of your topic involves (love, delusion, magic, art, life, etc.), the real subject of your discussion is not an abstract idea but the particular text in front of you. What's significant and interesting in the graveyard scene in *Hamlet*, for example, is not some abstract statement you can reduce it to that Shakespeare is making about death. Shakespeare is not trying to make an abstract statement about death. He is trying to dramatize the intense and complicated emotions that Hamlet feels at those particular moments in the context of what has already happened to him in the play. It's that particular situation, in all its richness and complexity, that you need to do justice to. The last thing in the world you want to do is reduce it to an abstract generalization—that's not what we read literature for. Leave the big generalizations (if any) for a sentence or two at the end of your specific discussion.

2. **ARGUMENT OR THESIS.** You need one. But don't try to decide ahead of time what it is going to be and then proceed to "plug in" all the evidence you can find that fits it. That approach will give you a discussion that is simplistic and reductive. Good literary analysis doesn't involve "interpreting" or cracking some kind of "code" to reveal what the text "means," or plugging in randomly chosen examples to prove something. It involves something more like thoughtful assessment—both of *what* the text says and *how* it says it. Begin by looking at ALL the evidence (i.e., everything that seems at all relevant to the topic you are writing about). Make lists, make notes—and then see what kinds of patterns emerge. Your "thesis" needs to be something that the evidence of the text *allows* you to say. It also needs to be a real "so-what"—something that will make a

reader want to know what you have to say, something that will make a reader feel at the end that your discussion was worth the read. You're going for a reaction like, "Wow, I never thought of it that way before, or I never noticed that before. Now I really appreciate this scene or character." This "so-what" will probably not come to you at once, but YOU CAN'T BEGIN WRITING YOUR PAPER UNTIL YOU KNOW *WHERE YOU WANT IT TO END UP, HOW TO GET THERE IN AN INTERESTING WAY, AND WHY IT'S IMPORTANT*. Try looking for questions or problems that your evidence may pose. Ask yourself what's interesting about the material. What does it let you understand about the text that's not immediately obvious? What got *you* interested or curious or moved? Look for patterns that will let you hold all the different aspects of your topic in an interesting or surprising relationship to one another. Look especially for things that seem odd or hard to explain, and try to figure out how *those* things fit with everything else you notice. Try to imagine a number of different conclusions that your evidence might lead to. If you can't imagine an argument that would differ from yours, you probably don't have a very good thesis.

3. **ORGANIZATION.** Organize your paper by figuring out what your most important idea is or what your best and most interesting insight is. That is the one that should control all the others and hold them together in a logical relationship. You might have to write a rough draft first to discover what your best idea is, but then revise your draft so that your discussion builds to your most important point, the one you most want your reader to agree with. Introduce your discussion by posing a question or problem that your texts seem to raise—or perhaps the possibility of competing interpretations. Get your reader interested and curious about what you have to say, and then make sure your discussion moves with purpose from paragraph to paragraph. Usually you can just follow the order of your text, moving through it chronologically towards its (and your) climax. You don't necessarily have to make an outline first, but after you write your first draft, go through it and make sure every paragraph has a single main idea that the rest of the paragraph supports. You should be able to find and underline the sentence that contains this main idea, and if you read your main ideas in order they should move in a logically progressing sequence to a conclusion. What you do *not* want is a simple catalogue of loosely related observations (here's an aspect of this topic; here's another one; here's a third one). That's not an argument.

4. **FOCUS AND SCOPE.** Try to keep your paper focused on very specific scenes or characters. The less text you have to work with, the more depth and detail you can go into. *Don't* try to give an overview of the whole play or plays. You don't need to summarize the whole plot of *Hamlet*, for example, to begin a paper on the graveyard scene. Of course you can refer to earlier or later moments in the text when they are relevant to your discussion, but you can't possibly do justice to a whole play, much less two plays, in 4-5 pages. You *can* do justice to a carefully chosen set of small scenes or speeches.

5. **TEXTUAL EVIDENCE AND QUOTING.** Be generous in quoting the text you are discussing and situating yourself and your reader within it. Someone who has never read the play should be able to form an accurate impression of how the moments you discuss fit into its overall shape and content. Someone who knows the text well should be able to recognize exactly what you are referring to even if they don't have it in front of them and haven't thought about it before in exactly the same way you do. This isn't the same thing as plot summary. You can orient your reader deftly and gracefully with a few allusions and reminders. Use lots of details to illustrate and substantiate the points you make—not by quoting large chunks of text but by interweaving relevant short quotes into your own sentences.

6. **AUDIENCE.** Remember that you *have* one! Who you imagine your reader to be will determine how you shape and pitch your argument. You are not writing for a grade school student who has never read a Shakespeare play, or even a high school student who has just been introduced to Shakespeare. On the other hand, you are also not writing for the Shakespeare scholar who has read Shakespeare for years and written books about him. You *are* writing for a reader like yourself and your classmates. Your audience has read and studied the same plays you have, participated in the same discussions, heard the same lectures. If you imagine your classmates as the audience for your paper, you won't tell them things they already know ("*Hamlet* is a play about a prince who is struggling with the loss of his father"). You won't try to make big sweeping generalizations, historical or otherwise, that you then expect to use to explain the text ("Love is the most absorbing and trying of all emotions"; "Lovers in the 16th century cared more about style than genuine emotion"). Your subject is not love and not lovers in the 16th century (see #1 above); it's the way particular characters act in a particular scene in the particular play you are discussing. The only thing you can use to show or prove something about them is what they say or do in the text. Do, though, remind your readers of things they might not remember if they don't have the text right in front of them. Quote generously to make clear where you are in the text and what you are referring to. Try to anticipate and ward off objections from someone who may not agree with you or might not see what you see. (If your argument is so blatantly obvious that no one would disagree, it is probably not a very interesting argument.)