

Fall 8-15-2007

ENG 1091G-096: Composition and Literature, Honors

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Recommended Citation

Kilgore, John, "ENG 1091G-096: Composition and Literature, Honors" (2007). *Fall 2007*. 59.
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Current Assignment

Readings as assigned.

NEXT HAND-IN DATE:

Grammar test, in class
Tuesday September 4.

Last Update:
8/19 /2007

General Information

COURSE DESCRIPTION: An honors-level introductory composition course aimed at general proficiency in written exposition. Assignments include a quick review of troublesome points in grammar and usage; a personal narrative; three expository essays; and a major research project in a field of the student's choice. Everyone will submit two pieces of writing to the class for helpful workshop discussion.

INSTRUCTOR: John Kilgore. Office: 3331 Coleman Hall. Hours: W 12-4; TR 3:30-4:30; and by appointment. Also often here Monday afternoon and TR 10-11. Phone: (217) 581-6313 (office); (217) 345-7395 (home). Home page:

<http://www.ux1.eiu.edu/~jdkilgore> . Feel free to call me at home if you need to. I prefer that you **NOT** visit me with questions just before class begins; just after is fine. Feel free to email me at jdkilgore@eiu.edu ; if I don't have time to reply, I will say so.

COURSE REQUIREMENTS:

- Attendance and participation — 10%
- Grammar Review — 10%
- Personal Narrative (c. 1000 words) — 15%
- Process, Analysis, or Comparison and Contrast essay (c. 750 words) — 10%
- Critical Essay (c. 1000 words) — 15%
- Persuasive Essay (c. 1000 words) — 10%
- Research Paper (c. 2500 words) — 30%

The persuasive paper, though not exactly a dry run for the research paper, should deal

with a topic in the same general area. I reserve the right to depart somewhat from these percentages. There will be no final exam in the course.

REQUIRED TEXTS:

Fulwiler and Hayakawa, *The Blair Handbook*, 5th ed.
Peterson and Brereton, *The Norton Reader*, 11th ed.
Kennedy, et al, *The Bedford Reader*, 8th ed.

ATTENDANCE. I will take attendance at each meeting by passing around a sign-up sheet which you must find and sign. The scale for your participation grade is as follows: 0-2 absences = A, 3 = B, 4 = C, 5 = D, 6 = F, 7 or more = continuing, proportional grade penalties. (The attendance grade will become a negative number, averaged into your overall course grade. Your mother will be unhappy.)

If you must miss a class beyond your allowed free days, be sure to do the following: 1) Contact me as soon as possible to explain why the absence is necessary and why you have used up your free days; 2) Arrange to do a two-hour make-up writing assignment; 3) Hand in the make-up work, within one week of your return to class, typed, double-spaced, with a heading that clearly states what day is being made up; 4) e-mail me a week later to make sure the missed day has been duly credited.

It's really much easier just to be here. But I want to allow leeway for legitimate emergencies, while strongly discouraging unnecessary absences.

During the second round of workshop, special rules will apply: Group 1 does not attend during Group 2's two workshop days, and vice versa. In addition it is possible that there will be one or two optional attendance days, clearly announced in advance, when you may attend or not, just as you please.

Note: when you miss, you remain responsible for all material covered in your absence, in accordance with university policy.

Manuscript format. Double-space all your papers and leave 1" or 1.25" margins all around. Use 12-point font and **number all your pages**. On the first page, put your name, the course number, the date, and the assignment ("Paper Number 1") in the top-left corner, using a smaller font for this heading if you like. Put your title, centered, about one third to one half the way down the page, and skip one extra line before beginning the text of your paper. Indent all paragraphs 5-8 spaces, and do **not** skip extra spaces between paragraphs, except, rarely, to mark a major transition between sections of your paper. Avoid subheadings and section numbers unless you feel you have exceptionally good reasons for using them. No cover pages please, and no report covers (these are a real nuisance). Get your staple all the way up in the top-left corner of your pages. Avoid exotic fonts, ink in colors other than black, and paper in colors other than white.

All papers written with the help of sources must include a Works Cited page, and the research paper must cite a minimum of ten print sources (with as many additional internet sources as you like). Use either APA or MLA format, as explained in the *Blair Handbook*, and avoid vague attribution by directly engaging and discussing your sources. **See below** for further guidelines and topic suggestions.

Workshop Copies. On two occasions during the course — Weeks 7 and 12 — you will be responsible for providing copies of your essays for workshop discussion. During the first round, this will mean 17 copies total including one for me, one for each student in the class, and one extra. For the second round, just 9 or 10 copies will be needed. I apologize for the expense. If it will help, you are welcome to change the formatting on these

copies. Shrink the font to 10 or 11 points, change the spacing from double to 1-1/2, and copy on both sides of the page if this will save money.

For additional general advice on writing about literature, a clearer sense of my goals and expectations, and a key to the correction symbols I will use in annotating your papers, see the **Writing Guidelines** I have placed online for this and several other courses.

Note: I am happy to comment on drafts and fragments submitted by e-mail (always as an attached file in Word or .rtf, please), but only hard copy will be acceptable for work that is being handed in for credit and a grade. Final decisions about format should express your authorial intentions, not the caprices of e-mail programs and printer technology.

MISCELLANEOUS. I will be more than happy to make reasonable accommodations for any student with a documented disability. Please contact me if you will need such an accommodation; or call the Coordinator of the Office of Disability Services, 581-6583.

Please be aware that the penalty for deliberate plagiarism or cheating on the exam will be automatic failure of the course. See me if you have any questions about this policy.

SCHEDULE

Note: Be on the alert for changes; check the "Current Assignment" window online regularly. Please complete readings assigned for any session **before** the class meets, and read student essays scheduled for workshop very carefully in advance of the meeting.

Page numbers refer to *The Norton Reader* (N), *The Bedford Reader* (B), or *The Blair Handbook* (H).

1) August 21, 23

Course Introduction. Preliminary thoughts on research projects.
Grammar review: Fragments; comma splices; other comma issues; subordination and coordination; commas and semicolons; restrictive and nonrestrictive modifiers; compound subjects and predicates vs. compounds sentences; pronoun and verb agreement; verb tenses; parallel structure; mixed constructions; chopiness and sentence combining.

This week and next, do the following exercises in H, reading the preceding sections as necessary to complete the task: 2, p. 469; 4 & 5, p. 470; 4 & 5, p. 479; 6, p. 505; 8, p. 509; 9, p. 510; 11, p. 518; 12, p. 519; 10, p. 538; 7, p. 551; 8 & 9, p. 554; 3, p. 578; 4, p. 580; 3, p. 597; 6, p. 601; 11, p. 610; 1, p. 622; 5, p. 652; 5, p. 367; 8, p. 368; 11, p. 372; 13, p. 373. **Be on the lookout for electronic copies in your e-mail. Using these will spare you having to re-type all the sentences.**

2) August 28, 30

Grammar review, continued

3) September 4, 6

Tuesday: Grammar Test

Thursday: Choose Research Topic. Personal Narrative. Read Amy Tan, "Fish Cheeks," B 92; Brad Manning, "Arm Wrestling With my Father," B 136.

4) September 11, 13

Tuesday: Sherman Alexie, "Indian Education," B 103; Barbara Huttman, "A Crime of Compassion," B 112. Share and brainstorm beginnings of personal narratives.

Thursday: Paul Theroux, "Being a Man," N 233; Scott Russell Sanders, "Looking at Women," N 244.

5) September 18, 20

Tuesday: Molly Ivins, "Get a Knife . . .," N 389; Henry Wechsler, *et al*, "Too Many Colleges . . .," N 397. Malcolm Gladwell, "The Sports Taboo," N 266.

Persuasive Essay Assigned

Tuesday: Personal Narrative Due

Chitra Divakaruni, "Live Free and Starve," B 529; Peter Singer, "The Singer Solution to World Poverty," B 534.

6) September 25, 27

Tuesday: In-class writing. Practice beginnings. Read B, "Thesis-Based Writing," 59-60; also 95-96.

Thursday: Brainstorming and Discussion of Research Projects.

7) October 2, 4

Tuesday: Persuasive Essay Due.

Thursday: Copies of First or Second Essay for workshop. Begin workshop discussions.

8) October 9, 11

TR: Workshop

Thursday: Interpreting nursery rhymes. (Handout).

9) October 16, 18

TR: Workshop

Tuesday: Critical Essay Due

Choose Groups for second round of workshop.

10) October 23, 25

TR: Read B, Chapters 7-9, including the following essays: Suzanne Britt, "Neat People vs. Sloppy People," 223; Lucinda Rosenfeld, "How to Dump a Friend," 281; Jessica Mitford, "Behind the Formaldehyde Curtain," 290; Shelby Steele, "Notes from the Hip-Hop Underground," 328; Emily Prager, "Our Barbies, Ourselves," 334. (Other essays optional.)

11) October 30, November 1

TR: Research methods and conventions. Read and discuss the following: B, Chapter 3, including the research paper by Greg Tartaglia. Then H, Chapters 12-15, 16, and the sample essays in Chapter 17. Brainstorming and discussion of research papers. (Oral presentations required.)

Thursday: Process, Analysis, or Comparison and Contrast Essay Due

12) November 6, 8

Tuesday: Copies of Essay 3 or 4 for Workshop. Workshop discussion, Group 1.

Thursday: Workshop discussion, Group 1.

13) November 13, 15

Workshop, Group 2.

Thanksgiving Break, November 19-23

14) November 27, 29

Workshop and conferences as needed.

15) December 4, 6

TR: Present and hand in research papers.

Research Paper

The research paper is the major assignment for the course, accounting for about 30% of the final grade. By the end of week 3, you must commit to your topic, which you will NOT be allowed to change. Choose an option from the list below; or, after reading the list, invent a topic of your own that seems similar in spirit and design. You MUST obtain approval for your project in either case, as no more than 2 students will be allowed to work on any given topic. The idea here (in addition to averting conflicts over research materials) is to let every student become a "relative expert" *vis-a-vis* the group, accumulating, over the course of the semester, some expertise that no one (including me) fully shares. An extra benefit is that this should make our workshop discussions genuinely interesting and informative.

Though I somewhat grudgingly follow custom and refer to this as a "research paper," it should essentially be a persuasive paper or well-focused exposition

that *happens* to be researched and information-rich. The key is to focus, focus, focus, letting the argument or research question drive the research rather than vice versa. Give information because it is directly relevant and necessary to your argument, not just because you happen to have found it. Imagine your classmates as your audience, and use that criterion, too, to make decisions about what to include or exclude.

Your Works Cited page must include a minimum of ten print sources, with as many additional internet sources as you like. Peer-reviewed databases and subscription services may count as print sources if you like; but you must keep a copy of any such source in your notes (an e-copy will be fine) and e-mail it to me if I ask to see it. Wikipedia and Google are a great place to *start* your research; but push on to more credible, sophisticated, peer-reviewed sources as you pursue the particular questions that are intrinsic to your project. Be careful with internet sources — much of what is out there is unreliable — and try in general to bring a critical perspective to bear on all your sources. Be sure to include date captured for internet sources, and keep a hard copy in your notes for the paper.

Some things to avoid: “data dumps” of materials only loosely related; long reviews of introductory material that ought to be covered quickly or simply taken for granted; “padding” by means of unnecessary or insufficiently edited quotes; vagueness in your thesis or argumentative position; tangents; impersonal, textbook-style prose that conveniently fudges the question of what thoughts are original with you; of and especially, always, any failure to deal conscientiously with your sources.

Let me expand a little — well, rant a little — on that last point. The problem with research papers, by and large, is the name. It implies that students are being asked to do the impossible: to take just a few weeks and make an original contribution to some field that real scholars, many of them quite brilliant, have been working in all their lives. Faced with this impossible demand, students naturally learn to interpret “research” as, in fact, the fine art of pretending to know ten times more than they possibly could, while writing an abstract and cloudy prose that continually obscures the question of how the student or anyone else could possibly know what is being claimed as truth. The typical paper contains plenty of citations, but most of these are the nearly useless kind that assert some kind of vague link between whatever has just been said (in the last phrase? the last sentence? the last paragraph? No one knows, or is meant to know) and an item in the Works Cited page. Direct discussion of sources — of what the student author found where, and what he thinks about it — are rare to nonexistent. At the end of the paper comes an impressive and very *long* bibliography, featuring many books which the student author cannot possibly have read, but which the instructor, as everyone knows, has no time to track down.

Such papers are a pain to write and a pain to read. Avoid the mode absolutely by adhering to the following points of my No-Baloney Policy:

- Understand that no one is asking you to become an expert in the final sense. You are being asked only to become *more* expert than your classmates, within the particular area you have chosen for yourself. Research is unfinished business by its nature, because answers always

lead to new questions. But as long as your paper is reasonably informative **to us**, in ways clearly related to your thesis, you are as expert as you need to be.

- Write to us — to the class, or at most to the non-specialist public — not to an imagined audience of scholars and experts. Go ahead and be somewhat personal and informal. Try not to work the first-person (“I”) to death, but do use it judiciously, perhaps especially when confessing doubt over some issue you have not yet managed to settle for yourself.
- **Dramatize your relationship to your sources.** Within reason, discuss your own research process: let us see where and how you learned what you know. Where appropriate, briefly evaluate particular sources as more or less useful and accurate. Use all the various methods available for citing your sources: summary, paraphrase, short quotation, block quotation, and even the kind of quickie, blind citation I discourage above, though these should mainly be reserved for very minor information. The key is to bring the sources into the paper, letting us hear other voices along with yours, whether you agree or disagree with them.
- Propose your topic clearly, and keep your research well focused. When you begin your research, ask yourself over and over again, “Why am I reading this? Is this what I need to be reading? How is this relevant to my thesis?” Put a lot of energy into finding the sources you need before you invest the time in reading them. The goal is to find, then thoroughly digest, the relatively few sources that really are helpful to the direction you have defined ahead of time; and then to integrate these thoroughly and clearly into your essay.

Prefer recent sources to older ones, and articles to books. The recent articles will often summarize, evaluate, and even correct earlier work, and you simply do not have the time to read whole books without stumbling into the “single source trap,” discussed below. When you do consult books, turn to the index first; try to find what you really need, rather than just wading in. Prefer scholarly articles, by a long stretch, to pieces in mass circulation magazines.

Choose one of the options given below, **or define a topic of your own that seems similar in scope and spirit.** Note that topics will be approved on a first-come, first-served basis, and you might not get your first-choice topic if you do not sign up for it quickly. No more than two students may work on any one of the pre-defined options. If you are creating your own topic, you must begin by writing a prompt, similar to those which follow, and submitting this to me, with a copy to be included as an appendix to the final draft of your paper. I will be more than happy to help you work out a customized topic if that is your inclination.

Topics

1. **The Social Cost of Violent Entertainment.** Do video games, slasher movies, and the like encourage violent behavior? Are rates of assault, murder, and rape higher because of the way our society indulges its (clearly enormous) appetite for violent fantasy? Do we pay other social costs as well? At what point should we think about curbing rather than indulging the appetite for imaginary violence? What guidelines would you suggest for distinguishing between the sick and the healthy, the harmful and the harmless, the excessive and the permissible? How could social

controls on violent entertainment be enforced? Is it possible that suppressing violent entertainment could have unforeseen negative consequences?

Note that this is potentially a HUGE topic, and you will have to give some serious thought about how to limit your research and your argument. It might be best to think of this as an exploratory essay, one that raises as many questions as it answers, aiming to provoke discussion rather than to settle all dispute. (Having a strong thesis is not *always* the same thing as being opinionated.) Your own intuitions should play an important role in this project, but be careful not to plunge over the brink into mere subjectivism; avoid ridicule and appeals to emotion, and understand the limitations of appeals to anecdote and personal experience. "My friend Joe plays video games all the time, and he wouldn't hurt a flea." Well, great, but A) Joe might be even *more* meek if he didn't play the games; B) You don't really know how violent Joe is capable of being, and neither does Joe; and C) Someone other than Joe might have a very different reaction to the same games. It's a complex issue!

Two complicating factors you might want to reflect on at some point: 1) Isn't fantasy sometimes a *substitute* for action rather than a prologue to it? Isn't it possible that violent fantasy actually *decreases* violent behavior rather than the opposite? 2) Isn't a capacity for violence sometimes a social *good*? Think of the role that police and the military have played in nearly all societies, and the way their training tries explicitly to "toughen up" the new recruit. And think of the way that fathers and older brothers have traditionally worked to prepare young boys to defend themselves at need.

2. **The Social Cost of Pornography.** Essentially the same topic as the above, but focus on erotic rather than violent materials. Here the cost in terms of assault and murder is presumably less of an issue, though it seems quite possible that pornography would be a significant contributing factor to rape. In a more general sense, the social cost may be a loss in human respect for oneself and others (notice how explicitly derogatory the language of pornography often is) and a decrease in general psychological well-being. Children in particular may pay a high psychological price for a premature initiation into erotic knowledge, and even atheists may well worry that immersion in pornography can erode other values (kindness, honesty, a work ethic, etc.).

On the other hand, it's quite possible to argue that our concern with pornography is excessive, and that crusaders in particular have greatly overestimated the ills and dangers. Decide what you think and argue your point, energetically marshalling your facts to support your position.

The topic is obviously a delicate one, and will challenge your ability to speak frankly to an audience without unduly affronting them or engaging emotions in unprofitable ways. Be tactful but not squeamish, blunt but not indelicate. Use more formal language than you might with another topic (even #1, above: yes, sex is harder to talk about than violence; it just is). Remember that the importance of the issue justifies a detailed, exact, and outspoken treatment. You may want to include illustrations in your paper (seriously), but probably these should be relatively tame compared to other images you merely *describe*, in words.

With this topic more than any of the others, I would recommend going to the internet last rather than first. Primary sources (ahem!) can wait. There is a wealth of scholarly and analytical literature on this topic, and you should begin by trying to get a clear sense of recent academic opinion, both among anti-porn crusaders and those who take a more tolerant view.

3. **Careers in _____.** Fill in the blank with the career you imagine for yourself at this point (always remembering that you may well change your mind, then change it again). Then set out to discover as much objective, useful information as you can about this field. What jobs are available, and in what part of the country (or world) are they most available? What credential is typically required for an entry-level position? What percentage of job-seekers have been obtaining placement? What is a typical entry-level salary? What might a typical career path — from the entry level on up to more responsible positions — look like, and what pay might be reasonably expected at each level? What would the typical duties and challenges be at each level? What is a reasonable expectation for lifetime income, and how does this compare to that of other professions a worker might have chosen in preference to this one? What studies of lifetime career satisfaction are available for this profession? What are the greatest sources of satisfaction and of dissatisfaction? . . . And now that you know all this, would you *still* choose this as your future profession?
4. **Building Your Home.** It is the year 2020. You find yourself happily married, with two children aged 6 and 4. You and your spouse both have incomes around the national median (which should put you well above average for your age group), and are living in a comfortable apartment. But you have saved up a nest egg (around \$25,000 in today's dollars — about \$60,000, let's say, in 2020) and now plan to build your own home. Your goal is to plan a home that will be comfortable, safe, convenient, and affordable for your family, and also one that will be a good investment, holding or increasing its value over the years.

Imagine each step of the process, from buying the lot to hiring the contractor to moving in the first pieces of furniture. Then explain and justify all your choices, adducing as much relevant factual information as you can. This should not be a mere fantasy trip, but an attempt to model some genuinely informed, intelligent, and responsible choices. Tell us what color the nursery will be and why, but also how much insulation you will have blown into the crawl space and why, and what kind of mortgage you are choosing and why. Base all your financial assumptions on the inflation figures given above (a ratio of 25/60 between today's dollars and dollars in the future), but assume that other factors, like the relative costs of gas and electricity or the relative popularity of ranch houses to two-story houses, will mostly remain the same.

The topic will quite likely require some primary field research. For instance, you might want to make some phone calls to builders in what you decide is your future neighborhood, and you might want to get some online mortgage payment estimates (but try not to waste the time of anyone who is working hard for a living). Such close-up fact-finding should be supported by good background research into the fundamentals

of real estate, architecture, and home design. You might want to start your library research by browsing the Real Estate section of the *New York Times* or one of the Chicago papers.

If after researching the topic for a while, you decide that buying an existing home is a better choice than building one, go ahead and project that plan. But give a clear defense of why older housing turn out to be a better investment for you, in both financial and personal terms. Then give a lengthy, informed account of what kind of house you will look for and what renovations you will undertake.

5. **Grade School Best Sellers.** Leaving aside the Harry Potter books, what have been the ten or fifteen most popular books among K-6 students over the past decade or so? Comparing lists given by various authorities, try to arrive at a more or less reliable ranking. Then read (or at least skim) all of the books, and try to reach some conclusions. What is it that is making these books popular? Can you see some common threads that run through this diverse list? Is this reading contributing to children's education and their outlook on life in worthwhile ways, or does the list seem dominated by commercial values — the quick thrill, the easy answer? Is the literary landscape for children inspiring or depressing?
6. **The _____ Century as Seen in _____.** Take a favorite movie set at least 60 years in the past, and produce a detailed, painstaking assessment of its historical accuracy. Go over and over the film, questioning the accuracy of particular details, not just to enhance your appreciation of the work itself, but to deepen your knowledge of the historical era depicted. Start by looking for obvious anachronisms, then turn to more subtle questions. Supposedly (I haven't really checked this out), one of the extras in a battle scene of *Spartacus* (set in the first century BC) is wearing a wristwatch, and a character in some old B film spouts the line, "Men of the Middle Ages, we're off to fight the Hundred Years War!" Such howlers are fun and funny, but more subtle falsifications may ultimately be more instructive. Gunfighters in the Old West almost never faced off Hollywood style, as in a duel, but somehow we are eager to believe that they did, and why is an interesting question. In general, actors in historical films are probably taller, cleaner, and better dressed than they would really have been, and have teeth that are much straighter and whiter. Their dialogue is nearly always laced with expressions that did not actually exist at the time ostensibly depicted. Explaining such things can lead to interesting discussions of such things as vitamin supplements, fluoridation, washing machines, and grammar.

But it can be equally worthwhile to concentrate on details that have been gotten right. Sometimes a well-chosen detail may make a whole era come to life, and sometimes, perversely, a "true" detail is so distracting you wish the director had lied. (One example: In the movie *Gettysburg*, General James Longstreet's huge beard has been faithfully modeled on surviving daguerreotypes, but a modern viewer simply can't help feeling that this man looks ridiculous — not a good thing, in a somber, tragic film.) The "Special Features" on your DVD may be a good place to start your research, giving some insight into the director's thinking, into the effect he or she was aiming for in choosing a certain backdrop, implement, phrase, or other detail in a given scene.

7. **The Motivation of the Suicide Bomber.** Insurgent groups in the Middle East have shown an amazing capacity to produce suicide fighters, men and sometimes women willing to accept their own guaranteed deaths in order to harm enemies perceived or actual. What motivates such fighters? Where do they find the courage — and cold-blooded inhumanity — to complete their deperate missions? Do they generally fit one demographic and psychological profile? Do they usually accept promises of immortality as the literal truth of what will follow their deaths? To what extent do indoctrination and social and peer pressure influence them? What role does poverty play? Have they often suffered violence to themselves or to near relations or associates? How does their training and preparation differ from that of their opposite numbers — the trained infantry of America, Britain, and other countries?

You will probably not find answers to all of these questions, but surely a great deal of rather frantic research in the area has taken place since the September 11 catastrophe in the U.S. You might start your own search in scholarly journals devoted to foreign affairs, military science, and psychology.

8. **Suicide in Modern American Poetry.** Suicide and near-suicide have been appallingly prevalent among modern American poets. Read brief (article-length) biographies of Plath, Berryman, Sexton, Roethke, Lowell, and any other poets you can discover who either commit suicide or are subject to recurrent depression. Find as many poems as you can that touch on the subject, and hand in a selection (though not too long, please) together with your paper, which should be a commentary on the poems themselves and on the general subject. How would you account for the link between intense depression and brilliant creativity? Has the link grown stronger in modern times, or was it always a feature of poetic genius? NB: you should probably read at least the introductory chapters of Alvarez's *The Savage God* and Jameson's *Touched With Fire*, two famous studies of this grim subject. Or you might want to start by reading Amazon.com reviews of those two books, to get an overview.
9. **The Literature of the Playground.** Through first-hand research — interviewing friends and relatives — compile an anthology of playground poems — rhymes that two or more of your informants can remember learning from friends during their preteen years. Where versions vary, decide what version you prefer, but provide a note of the variant if the departure seems significant.

The anthology may run up to five pages, but should be counted as an appendix to the paper itself, which should still be about 2000 words or so. In this discussion, describe and analyze your collection. What has made these particular specimens so popular and durable? How is it that the same poem can be transmitted orally for many years, through thousands and millions of repetitions, and yet remain substantially unchanged? Try to give intensive examinations of particular specimens, explaining, for example, why we get such a kick out of "Cinderella / Dressed in yella" mistakenly kissing a snake that the little rhyme never changes, in plot or in wording. Plenty has been written on such subjects, so try to bring in some expert opinion to help you in this part of the discussion.

10. **The Critical Reception of _____**. Fill in the blanks with a movie, novel, play, album, or painting of your choice, then read as many reviews of the work as you can find. Try to answer the following questions: Was critical reception favorable or not? What strengths and weaknesses were most often cited? What areas of critical controversy emerged? Has the initial response to the work held up, or have perceptions changed over time? Has a consensus on the value of the work ever emerged? And — last but not least — what do you think?

This option will probably work best with some work that has been controversial, exciting sharply varied opinions and perspectives that have changed over time. In analyzing various critical positions, try to show what each regards as the fundamental criteria of value — what the critic regards as the basic function and nature and purpose of art. The topic may sound heavy and academic, but properly handled it can be quite engaging — a very stimulating conversation, among very bright people, in the lobby after the movie, with you playing the part of moderator.

Pitfalls

Do your best to avoid the following common problems:

- **The Scrapbook Approach (or "Data Dump")**. The paper is so full of quotes and paraphrases, many of them poorly assimilated to the thesis, that overall coherence and interest are lacking. The paper feels padded and directionless. The reader falls asleep. Avoid by cultivating a firm, definite sense of your own purpose and thesis.
- **The Single-Source Trap**. Halfway through the project, you discover an article that says everything you wanted to say. Abashed and intimidated, you quote this source thirteen times in your own essay, making the reader wish he could be reading it instead of your paper, which seems to have no ideas of its own. Avoid by finishing your research early on, defining your topic clearly, digesting your sources completely, and integrating a wide variety of sources.
- **The "All About" Paper**. The essay has no real focus and consists mainly of background information that is readily available from many sources. Rather than pursuing a thesis, it seems to drift and free-associate. Avoid by focusing on your thesis and argument, declining all tangents.
- **Vague Attribution**. The paper is full of information whose nature, origin, and credibility are unclear. Though citations occur with some regularity, they tend to be vague, and the paper shows an enormous preference for paraphrase over direct quotation and explicit summary. As a result the reader can't tell, from one sentence to the next, whether he is reading your opinions, someone else's, or common background knowledge. Only the most meticulous reader can tell whether the paper is a mechanical paraphrase of two or three sources, or a decent job of research poorly presented. Instructors sometimes give students the benefit of such doubt. Not me. I don't believe that doing so is really a favor to the student, who learns to write horribly tedious, murky prose, or to anyone who must read his or her work in the future.

Avoid by talking directly about your sources, using various methods of citation as appropriate (short quote, long quote, summary, etc.), and by taking a more personal tone, explicitly distinguishing your own conclusions, opinions, doubts, and confusions.

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