

A Brief Guide to Writing Essays

Note: The following guide has been borrowed from the Piet Zwart Institute, Media Design handbook as authored by Dr. Florian Cramer, Director of the Media Design MA, and then adapted to suit this class.

Essay or paper writing is a core component of this major. The following guidelines will help you structure your essays into a clear argument, and in literary studies, the vast majority of our writing is argumentative as defined below:

An argumentative paper makes a claim about a topic and justifies this claim with specific evidence. The claim in a literary paper or article is almost always an interpretation. The goal of the argumentative paper is to convince the audience that the claim is true based on the evidence provided.

Introduction: Every good paper, regardless by whom and on which academic level it was written, essentially boils down to investigating a single question. What is the question you are going to investigate in your paper? This will involve the writing of a 'thesis statement'. If you only have a subject or topic you want to write on, but not a question, you need to rethink before starting your essay.

- * Why do you have an interest in this subject? What is interesting about the question? Some reasons can be directly related to literary studies or can simply be related to more general concerns... nonetheless state explicitly what these concerns are.

- * Say what your method of analysis will be; in other words, map out the journey your reader is going to have to take with you. Are you looking primarily at form, or will you be incorporating in other material, by using historical data or a particular theoretical approach?

- * Why are you approaching the subject in the particular style or manner you have chosen? For example, because it reveals something previously overlooked; because another scholar effectively took a similar approach with his/her work; Etc.

Despite the above points: Keep the introduction as brief as possible. It shouldn't be longer than one page, and less would be better.

The body of your text: The body of your text is the journey you undertake in writing: it is how you get from point A to point B, with the conclusion as the final destination. In other words: derive sub-questions from your major question or thesis and have your text logically go from one to the next.

- * Use your thesis as a point of reference in editing your material.

- * An important element of the body of your text is giving examples, working through them and analyzing them. Always base your arguments on observations you make in the material you investigate. Conversely, your body of text should not be an accumulation of examples and citations, but develop your own original argument.

- * It is about comparison and contrast; this is not the same as that, that implies not the same as

this... Make clever juxtapositions that give nuance to your argument.

* Descriptions are useful but don't overdo the detailing:

Details are important when they give evidence relevant to the claim you make in your thesis. Too many details however can be fatally distracting from your main point. Use them to enhance, not derail your argument or research. Some details may actually be detours which unnecessarily complicate or obscure your argument; if you really need to go off track, put this information in a footnote as a 'by the way did you know...!'. In placing it there you don't destroy the flow of your main text.

Conclusion:

* A conclusion is intended to recapitulate all of the information you have gone through in the paper. Conclusions answer, in a more general way, the ideas or questions raised in the introduction. At this point you should be asking yourself: Did I answer the questions I sought to explore in my thesis statement? Was I successful in going through examples to prove my point?

* A conclusion can never introduce totally new concepts as part of its argument. That would mean that you haven't done your homework in the main text. Introducing a totally new concept as part of your conclusion is like telling someone that you are driving them to the cinema (thesis statement) and when you arrive you don't let them out of the car but instead you drive off to a vacant lot. Needless to say that as a passenger this can be pretty irritating. Readers are also not very keen on this type of journey.

That does not mean that your conclusion might not raise particular questions, which are crucial to your conclusion. For example:

"In seeing how the use of X image shifts over the course of the poem/novel/text, we must ask whether this instability signals only a personal transition for the protagonist (or author) or is meant to draw our attention to a larger public issue."

Or: "In analysing these mechanisms at work we must ask the following: Who or what is being defined and by whom for what purposes?"

Do your conclusions have any relevance to you or anyone else? They should and you should say why. You should expand on the effect or implication of your ideas. This is the real point of the paper, and it should not be missed!

No paper, not even a 1000-page book, will ever answer all questions about its central question. You will have to live with incompleteness. Sometimes, it can be useful though to point to open questions or issues, in other words, left-overs from your thought process that didn't fit into the essay proper. Phrase these points, if you like, as open questions and potential directions of future research as an addendum to your conclusion.

referencing: Give credit where credit is due! Never borrow thoughts, quotes, or even paraphrase without properly crediting the original source. This is done through footnotes and through a list of references at the end of your paper. Accurate, clear referencing offers the reader the

opportunity to engage in the process of your research, and to understand how your arguments and ideas have been initiated and developed. Other people may use your paper as a resource to learn more about its topic and pick up related literature from your references. It is also, of course, essential that you distinguish between your own ideas and arguments, and those of other people; the more clear you are, the better you can shape your own ideas.

Conversely, citations do not replace your own thoughts and ideas. Never use sources as unquestioned authorities. The fact that a certain opinion was voiced by a well-known scholar, artist or intellectual doesn't make it true. Theories are there to show you things in a different light, but never to replace your own ideas and opinions.

Plagiarism: Not properly referencing your sources is plagiarism. Plagiarism means to present work done by others as your own. While plagiarism has sometimes been tactically advocated and used to question ideologies of intellectual property, and is not defined as a problem in some rhetorical or literary traditions, not crediting your sources is unacceptable in course work because it is dishonest to your teachers and fellow students. Plagiarism invalidates your essay and may result in further disciplinary procedure, including possible expulsion from the course, program and even the university.

lay out for quotations: Short quotations can be written as part of the flow of the sentence, with quotation marks. Longer quotations (four or more lines) should be separated from the main body of the text by means of indention. In this case quotation marks are not needed. For example:

I agree with Hal Foster when he says:

I supported a postmodernism that contested [...] reactionary cultural politics and advocated artistic practices not only critical of institutional modernism but suggestive of alternative forms of new ways to practice culture and politics. And we did not lose. In a sense the worse thing happened: treated as fashion postmodernism became *démodé*. (Foster, 1998, p.20)

Going further from this point, I would suggest that theory, a key feature of the postmodern enterprise, became *démodé* only after becoming convention...

- Be careful not use too many block quotations in your paper. You should never write a text which just consists of short remarks between block quotations! At the same time, especially for a formal analysis, be sure to quote long enough passages that readers whom do not have the original text in front of them can still understand the passage you discuss.

These guidelines are deliberately quite general to avoid restricting your thoughts or needs as a writer. If you have further questions, such as whether your argument makes sense, whether your organization is effective, or other concerns specific to your paper, post your text to the forum and ask for feedback.