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ENGLISH 10, FALL 2008.
ASSESSMENT GUIDELINE

For this course you must write three essays, one for each section of the course, that is: Poetry, Prose, and Drama. The first essay should be no longer than 1200 words or around 3 pages, while the second two should be between 5-7 pages.

Essays should be typed, double-spaced in font size 12, and should conform to MLA Style guidelines, with a Bibliography of works consulted.

THESE TIPS ARE MY VIEWS ON THE KINDS OF THING YOU SHOULD DO IN A UNIVERSITY-LEVEL ESSAY, AND THE KINDS OF THING YOU SHOULDN’T. I USE THE WORDS ‘SHOULD’ AND ‘SHOULDN’T’ CAUTIOUSLY, THOUGH, AS THERE’S NO ONE DEFINITIVELY RIGHT WAY ABOUT GOING ABOUT WRITING ESSAYS. STILL, WHILE IT MIGHT BE HARD TO PIN DOWN A FINAL SET OF RULES, THERE ARE SOME VERY USEFUL RULES OF THUMB.

Presentation and Grammar:
One rule that is not up for debate: it is absolutely vital that essays are presented correctly. Check and re-check spelling, grammar and quotations from primary sources. All essays should be word-processed and double-spaced, and should include a word-count and bibliography. You should carefully re-read your essay at least twice after you’ve finished it to check for grammatical errors and/or poor phrasing. An excellent way of spotting mistakes and moments of clumsiness is to read your essay aloud: it forces you to slow down (you can’t skim over the prose), and – usually – if an essay sounds clear, composed and in control when read aloud, that’s because it is. One pragmatic reason for paying so much attention to the style, presentation and grammar of your work is, simply, that marks are deducted for errors. But there’s also another, better reason: by getting yourself to focus on the little details of your own writing, you quickly get into the habit of seeing the importance of little details in the literature you’re reading and responding to. In my experience as a marker, those essays that are presented and written carefully are often the ones with the most interesting things to say: it’s as if a habitual attentiveness to the little things, to accuracy and clarity in one’s own writing, directly helps to foster an attentiveness to the complexity of the literary texts one is writing about. Put simply: training yourself to be a thoughtful, accurate writer can have a knock-on effect – it can help you to develop as a thoughtful, accurate reader.

Essay Topics:
The emphasis for this course is to encourage independent thinking, so when you are trying to figure out exactly what your essay will be about, try and decide where your own interests lie, whether a particular piece of work appeals to you, or perhaps does not appeal, and try to figure out why this might be. For the first essay on poetry, you will need to produce a close reading of the kind we have been attempting in class. If you focus on one of the poems we have already covered, I suggest you also choose another poem that relates in some way to your argument, make sure you’re not just repeating class discussion, but building on it.

A good way to think about your essay and its subject, is to think of a title. Titles should sound like other titles of published books or articles, not like exam questions. So – for instance – let’s say you want to write an essay on Shakespeare’s sonnets, or on the sonnet form more generally. Here’s the kind of phrasing you shouldn’t use as a title:

1) Discuss the ways in which Shakespeare uses rhyme in his sonnets.
2) To what extent does Shakespeare critically engage with the sonnet tradition in his work?
3) Compare and contrast sonnet sequences by two or more writers.
4) How does the sonnet form as utilized by one or more poets explore the relations between love and death?

Now, all of these are interesting areas of exploration, but when putting together your titles, you need to go for a more original and inventive opening. So, here are the four questions above re-phrased as acceptable titles. As you’ll see, some are more immediately revealing than others, but you don’t have to give away your whole argument or interest in a title (you can just suggest it).

I’ve given a couple of options for each idea:

1) Shakespeare’s Sound Effects
   Rhyme and Reason in Shakespeare’s sonnets

2) “My mistress’ eyes are nothing like the sun”: Shakespeare’s engagement with the sonnet tradition
   Tradition and experiment in Shakespeare’s sonnets.

3) Loving arguments: Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s Sonnets from the Portuguese and George Meredith’s Modern Love
   The momentary and the sequential in the Elizabethan sonnet tradition

4) “Remember me when I am gone away”: Christina Rossetti and poetic longing
   Dying for love: sacrifice and sonneteering

Close Analysis:
This is, I think, the most important aspect of essay-writing. Literary writers have choices, and the fundamental question to ask yourself whenever you are writing about a piece of literature is: ‘Why these words in these places?’ What distinguishes the really good essay from the rest of the pack is a willingness to engage in detail with the way in which literary style enriches and communicates meaning. In other words, good essays tend to focus frequently on how something is being said, rather than just on what is being said. For the most part, I’d avoid extended, generalized summary; the more specific your analysis of a particular text, the better. A very good rule of thumb: immediately after quoting a passage from a text, stop and examine the language in detail - i.e. focus on the style as well as the content of the passage you’ve quoted. Look closely at, for instance, individual words, phrases, syntax, tones, rhymes, stanza forms, rhythms, metaphors, images, narrative voice(s) and perspectives, representations of speech, sentence structures, etc. Do not end paragraphs with dangling quotations, but instead make sure you comment on the quotation. When you think you’ve made an important point from a good reference or quotation, or when you suspect you’ve exhausted the passage, go back to the text again and make at least two more points. Look again for peculiarities of syntax or vocabulary; get at the linguistic mechanics of the passage, as well as its semantics. To repeat all this yet another way: make sure that you don’t just describe a passage you’ve quoted, but analyze the way it’s put together.

Use of secondary criticism:

Writing on literature is a little bit like joining a conversation that’s already been started in your absence. It’s a good idea, then, to get a sense of where the conversation has come from before you launch straight in with your own opinion. Reading around in secondary criticism has an important part to play in your essay preparation and writing (it will help you to situate yourself in relation to the subject) and you should try to get a sense of what other literary critics have thought of the works you’re studying. However, do not allow your essay to become swamped by other critics’ responses to a text. It is very important to remember that reading and quoting other critics is not a substitute for your own argument. Use criticism only as a sounding board for your own particular response to the text. A golden rule: never just passively quote from a critic without engaging with what they are saying. What you need to do is to try to find ways to develop and/or qualify what a critic has written by relating their general statements to your own specific findings. Whatever you do, never simply present another reader’s judgment of a text. You should always be disagreeing with, qualifying or developing their case; make it your own. One more tip: secondary criticism has its place in your studies, but time is often very profitably spent reading more primary material and building this into your essay: e.g. if you’re working on a particular author, read more of that author’s work, or his/her letters, journals, criticism, etc. You might also read other types of
primary material: e.g. other contemporaries of the author who commented on his/her work, or other primary texts written around the same time.

A thought:
A good place to end is with the *Oxford English Dictionary*. Here are some of its definitions of the word ‘essay’:

*Essay* (after French, *essayer*), n:

I. The action or process of trying or testing.
   1. A trial, testing, proof; experiment;

II. A trying to do something
   5. An attempt, endeavour.
   8. A composition of moderate length on any particular subject, or branch of a subject; [...] a composition more or less elaborate in style, though limited in range.

*Oxford English Dictionary*

‘Essay’, then, from the French verb ‘essayer’, meaning ‘to try’, is not just a type of writing, but a form of activity – a trial, an experiment, a testing of the waters. This is worth bearing in mind, especially early on in your degree when you’re still trying to find your own voice. The essay, from this perspective, might best be considered as a mode of careful exploration rather than a string of constant assertion. You would do well, I think, to see the essay as not so much a final word on things, but more as a considered development of related ideas. To put it another way: a good essay will often display a willingness to journey around many sides of a question, rather than an eagerness to express a one-sided answer. This is not to say that an essay shouldn’t have an argument – it should – it’s just that it’s a good idea when you’re writing to remember that there is often more than one way of looking at it. As you’re composing your essay, then, a useful set of questions to consider would be the following: what potential objections might there be to my argument? How can I answer them? Do I need to take account of possible exceptions to the approach or view I’m putting forward?

**Essay 1: POETRY**

Essay 1 is due in class on Wednesday October 22nd. Deadlines are to be strictly observed and extensions are only granted in emergencies and exceptional circumstances. If you do not submit your essay by the deadline, you will lose points immediately, and for every day it is late thereafter. The word limit for essay 1 is 1200 words. You should choose a poem or poems from the Norton Anthology (preferably which we haven’t studied in class), then make up your own topic and provide a close reading of your chosen poem.
Essay 2: PROSE
Due in class on Monday November 17th. This essay should take as its focus some short stories from the Oates Anthology, or McCarthy’s The Road. Essay topics can and should be discussed with me prior to writing, either by email or during office hours. Essay 2 should be between 1800-2000 words.

Essay 3: DRAMA
Ideally should be submitted on Wednesday December 3rd, and should be handed in no later than Monday December 8th. Late essays will not be accepted, and no grade will be assigned if this is the case. Once again, I encourage you to discuss the essay with me prior to beginning. Between 1800-2000 words please.