

American Literary Traditions First Paper Assignment

The mid-semester paper is due AT THE BEGINNING OF CLASS on **Thursday, October 3rd**. There is no reading assignment scheduled for that day; we will use the time to catch up on any issues, and also prepare for the upcoming exam (which will happen on Tuesday, October 29th).

The paper should be a focused piece of writing of about 4-5 pages in which you make an argument for why **one** particular piece we've read so far should – or shouldn't – be included in our survey course. You may choose **ANY ONE** piece that we have read up until October 3rd. Check the syllabus for specifics of all the possible reading assignments, or ask if you have a question.

Develop your argument by thinking about these questions: Why is this piece necessary (or unnecessary) to the course? How does it fit (or not fit) into the overall progression of American literary history? You will want to use the text itself to make your argument. Consider both the style and content of the piece – what does it say and how does it say it?

This paper should make an **ARGUMENT** about a text. You need to come up with **reasons why we should (or why we shouldn't) read this text**. Typically, your paper should have 3 to 5 reasons for why we should read the text. Not all of these examples will work for all of the texts, and please note that you do not have to use **ANY** of these particular examples. These are just samples to get you going:

- It gives us insight into historical events (be specific about the events)
- It shows us how people lived (be specific about what people, time, or specific activities)
- The form/style is notable (what specific form, what specific style)
- The author him/herself is notable (why?)
- The publication of the text is notable (why?)
- It provides details we might not otherwise know (what details? Why wouldn't we know them?)
- The writing style/form is particularly beautiful, or challenging, or easy, or difficult....
- The content is particularly disturbing, or surprising, or confusing, or unusual.....
- The characters are very realistic, or not realistic, or exciting, or relatable.....
- The setting is an important place, or an imagined place, or an especially well described place....
- It gives us an example of how to make an argument, or write a poem, or express an emotion...

Here are some generic samples of what a thesis for this paper might look like:

- Story X is an important part of Early American literature because it provides insight to historical event Y, includes a fascinating description of behavior Q, makes an important argument about the issue W, and is an interesting reading.
- Poem B should be included in our survey because of its unique rhyme scheme, its powerful descriptive language, its reflection on its culture, and the importance of its author during her lifetime.
- It's important to read the letters of individual Z because they tell us about the finer details of life during C, they reveal surprising information about W, and they are a great example of B.

Things your paper **SHOULD NOT** do:

- The paper should **NOT** be a plot summary. We all know what happened in the text; I want to see your analysis of and response to the text.
- This is **NOT** a comparison/contrast essay. You should focus on **ONE** and only one text.
- The paper is **NOT** a straightforward "analyze this story" paper.
- This paper is **NOT** an analysis of metaphors or a profile of a character, although you might have a paragraph that does one (or both) of those things as a specific reason or example to support your argument.

Some Basic Reminders:

Your paper should start with an introduction. Clearly state your thesis – what claim will you argue in your paper? You should follow with your “evidence,” which will include QUOTES from the text that you are responding to, and interpretations of the text. Your paper should end with a conclusion that wraps up your analysis.

You **MUST** use quotes from your text. You may also include quotes from research sources, although additional research is not necessary for this paper. In any case, you **MUST** properly cite all sources (including texts from class). I will not accept papers without a Works Cited list. Seriously. I will hand it right back to you. For the love of Pete, use proper MLA style. When I see sloppy MLA style in a paper, I get cranky, and you really don't want to make me to be cranky while I'm grading your paper. The last page of this handout includes helpful information on proper MLA style. Consult it. Look at it again before you turn in your paper and make sure you've done things correctly!

On Using Sources:

You **DO NOT** need to use outside sources for this paper. If you have read the text you're writing about, you should be able to make an argument about whether or not it's worth reading.

If you do want to do some research, please be very careful. First, you need to keep in mind that you need to evaluate online sources for accuracy and authority. There are many, many bad sources out there. There are also many excellent, scholarly, academic sources available if you know how to find them. Talk to a librarian, use the library's web site, or ask me for help. I am regularly available by appointment, and you can always e-mail me your questions: bridget_marshall@uml.edu

You must cite all sources that you use, including online sources. Remember that “using” a source includes **DIRECTLY QUOTING, PARAPHRASING, AND USING IDEAS** from any source. There is nothing wrong with “getting help” from other writers, just be sure to acknowledge it by using quotation marks and/or author/page citation. Please take the time to give proper credit to the work of other authors. It is a matter of respect – for yourself, for other authors, for your classmates, and for me.

As usual, all policies on plagiarism apply to this paper and any other papers in this course. Please note that according to UMass policy, turning a paper for one class that you wrote for another class is plagiarism too. If you plagiarize in your paper, you will receive an “F” for the course, and you are subject to other discipline (including expulsion from the University) at the discretion of the instructor and the University. Instructors are required to report every case of plagiarism to the Academic Honesty Board, which keeps a record of all cases. Please remember that unintentional plagiarism is still plagiarism.

Do not try to buy, beg, borrow, barter, or otherwise acquire a paper from any of the “sources” out there (such as fraternity files or web sites). The quality of such material is generally suspect, and you are doing yourself a grave disservice. There is a more than decent chance you will be caught, and the consequences are very serious.

Other Helpful Hints for Writing Papers

DO NOT start your paper with any of the following:

- Webster's Dictionary defines "this word" as.....
- Since the dawn of time....
- Man has always...Humans have always....
- Literature has always...All of literature.....Literary history is.....
- In our society....In today's society.....In modern society...
- The purpose of this paper is In this paper, I will attempt to
- "Friendship [or whatever]" means different things to different people....

BE CAREFUL about making claims about "best," "first," "most," "the only," and the like, unless you have some evidence. Check your facts – more than once – before making historical claims, and be sure you know the subject area thoroughly.

BE SPECIFIC. Give examples! You have a case to prove, so you need to show evidence from the text itself.

DO use quotes properly. This means introducing them, citing them, and providing proper context. In the case of quoted dialogue, who speaks the words in the quote? Who hears them? Is the speaker the narrator?

DO create an engaging opening for your paper. Spend some time trying out different opening lines. Be dramatic. Be bold. Grab the reader by the throat, or other sensitive area of the body.

DO try a variety of organizational schemes. I strongly recommend that you write up an outline of your paper to help you build your argument. Make liberal use of the "cut" and "paste" commands – move whole blocks of paragraphs around to see if they work better in a different order. If you have a print-out of the essay, try cutting up and putting it back together in a different order; you may find a better way to order your evidence.

DO create transitions between your paragraphs. The first sentence of a new paragraph is a place where you can lead the reader from the previous paragraph's topic into the new paragraph's topic. This is easier if you've already done the previous step and achieved the optimal ORGANIZATION. A well-organized paper should make it easy to create transitions that connect your ideas.

DO make use of the resources available to you, including your peers, the campus writing center, online writing resources, and your professor.

DO start writing early; the best papers result from the multiple draft process. Even if you write a great paper on the first draft, developing a second draft will improve it.

DO give your essay a title. It should be more than just "Essay 1." Put the title at the top and center of your first page. You DO NOT need a title page. Save that tree.

DO NOT use question marks or exclamation marks in your paper, unless they occur within text you are quoting. Are rhetorical questions dreadfully overused in student papers? Yes. Should you avoid them? Yes. Why? Because they usually don't say all that much. Often they serve as "filler," or sometimes, perhaps to raise an emotional issue, usually with a great deal of (over)dramatization. "Hasn't this character suffered enough?" or "Isn't this author being rude?" are questions you ask when clearly YOU believe that the character has suffered or the author is being rude. Rather than ask the question, tell the reader that you think this is the case. All too frequently I see the following construction in papers: "Isn't this true? The answer is obvious." If the answer is obvious, why ask the question? Rhetorical questions are a sure sign to me that you're killing time with filler and haven't given enough thought to the truly puzzling questions that exist in a particular text.

MLA Style: A Brief Overview and Helpful Hints

Sloppy MLA style citation: there are few things in your papers for my course that more annoying to me and as easily prevented by you. Errors in citation indicate your carelessness; you should at least attempt to give the appearance that you care about the assignment. It's not difficult; just pay attention to some basic rules.

Below I have provided an example of a quote integrated into my own writing, with proper citation:

Mary Rowlandson provides detailed description of Native foodways: "They would pick up old bones, and cut them to pieces at the joints, and if they were full of worms and maggots, they would scald them over the fire to make the vermin come out, and the boil them, and drink up the liquor, and then beat the great ends of them in a mortar, and so eat them" (129).

Because I included the author's name in the introduction to the quote, I only needed to include the page number in the citation at the end of the quote. For successive quotes by the same author and in the same story, you only need to include the page number.

Once you have cited a text in your paper, you need to include a Works Cited list at the end of the paper, so that the reader can track down your source. Here is a sample of what the Works Cited page would look like for a paper that included the quotes above.

Works Cited

Rowlandson, Mary. "From A Narrative of the Captivity and Restoration of Mrs. Mary Rowlandson." *The Norton Anthology of American Literature: Shorter Eighth Edition*. Ed. Nina Baym. New York: W.W. Norton, 2012. 128 - 143. Print.

In the example above, "Works Cited" is centered on the page. The bibliographical entry starts with the author's last name, a comma, then the first name and a period. Next comes the title of the specific text in quotation marks only. Next comes the full title of the book (underlined OR italicized – not both!), followed by a period. Next, I've noted the editor of the anthology. After that, list the place of publication, a colon, and the publisher. The publisher is followed by a comma, then the year of publication, followed by a period. The numbers at the end of the entry indicate the pages where the specific work appears. Note that every entry in the works cited page is formatted with a hanging indent, meaning that the first line is flush with the margin, but successive lines of the same entry are indented five spaces.

Please note that ALL sources that you cite in the paper, and ONLY sources actually cited (quoted or paraphrased) in your paper should appear in the works cited. A works cited list is NOT a Bibliography (which typically includes all sources you consulted). The words "Works Cited" should appear top center of your page. As we've discussed, you can put the works cited list at the end of your final page of your paper's text; there is no need to use a new sheet of paper. You should also note that you DO NOT number the entries in a works cited list. They appear in alphabetical order. Also, use a HANGING INDENT for each entry (meaning after the first line, each successive line for the same entry is indented). If you're using Word, go to "Format," then "Paragraph," and under "Indentation" you will find an option "Special" that includes "Hanging Indent." Use it.

Helpful hint: You can copy the entry above and simply update it with the specific author, title of the piece, and page range for the text you choose.

For more information on citing different kinds of sources, particularly sources other than books, find an MLA style manual, available in the library and online.