Critical Responses

These **4-5 page analytic essays** will deal with one or more of the texts that we've read this semester. Your response should make—and adequately support—an argument that's based on the text(s) that you've selected. Part of the work, here, is in selecting and framing a topic. I've left this open because I'd like you to genuinely engage with and connect to the materials you choose to write about. To that end, we will work on developing your topics, arguments, and evidence in class. Eventually one of these critical responses will be developed into your final research papers.

1. Sign-up for two thesis workshops (Section B | Section D | Section E).
These opportunities for feedback will help you shape your topic and develop or strengthen your argument.

2. Choose a topic. This can be difficult, especially if you're used to receiving specific prompts. We will work on developing your topics in class, and you can also find recommendations and suggestions here. Please feel encouraged to come to office hours or to schedule an appointment to discuss your plans!

3. Thesis workshops. On the day that you're scheduled for a thesis workshop, you'll need to bring in copies of a handout for everyone in the class (at least one full page, single-spaced). You'll have 7-10 minutes to get feedback on your ideas, and you can use that time in the way that's most helpful to you—so long as you're able to discuss either one or two possible paper topics and potential arguments.

If you don't have a preference, then I will generally ask a series of questions: What would you like to write about? Do you have a sense of what your argument will be? What are your central pieces of evidence? Then I'll ask the class for feedback, ideas, and suggestions. The goal of these workshops is to help you find ways to either develop an idea or topic into an argument—or to make your argument stronger and sharper. These are ungraded because they really are for *you*. So don't be afraid to take risks!

Handouts generally offer a topic, a tentative thesis, and either an outline or the quotes that you might use. If you draw on contextual material that other students won't know, it also helps to put this on your handout. Handouts should end with 2-4 questions that you would like to ask the class.

* Don't forget: we will talk about how all of this works in class, but if you still have questions, you're always welcome to meet with me! I'd especially recommend meetings for people who give the first presentations this semester. I can help you think about your topic—and what this process will be like!

4. Write and revise your work. I've included a few pieces of general writing advice for these papers:

- Start strong! Don't stick with your initial "In the book *Moby-Dick* written by Herman Melville…"
- Watch out for sweeping generalizations, like the invocation of an undefined "we" or "man."
- Be careful with seemingly powerful words that you don't really define, like "fate" or "society."
- Make sure that you don't make things up, especially questionable generalizations about history.
- Remember: the only real *evidence* about a text comes from the *language* of that text.
- If you think you *might* need a citation, ask. An incorrect citation isn't a big deal. Plagiarism is.
- If you find that your conclusion conflicts with your introduction: revise.
- If you find that you've written a five-paragraph essay: revise.
- For a 4-5 page paper you should write at least *four full pages*.

Sample Essays from another class: These essays may be helpful as you develop your own work.
Rue Morgue | Sherlock Holmes & Professor Bell | Melville | Yellow Wallpaper

Sources: If you choose to use outside sources for your papers, then you need to make sure they are credible, scholarly sources. You can read more about what this entails here.

5. Submit your paper. Papers are due by 5 PM on March 2nd. (Midterm grades are due March 12th). Ideally you'll want to write on the paper topic that you developed and refined during your thesis workshop. But if you'd like to make a change because you hit a dead end—or another text captures your attention—then you're welcome to make a change. Just email your new topic, and I'll reply with feedback if I can.

Papers should be submitted to Sakai "Assignments" as MS Word attachments (.doc files).
You should also bring a stapled paper copy to class.

Paper Workshops: We'll have paper workshops during class the week before each set of papers is due. You can see an example of a draft workshop handout here. You're also welcome to work through these questions in small groups on your own. (These handouts capture the things I focus on when I grade).

Extensions: If you would like an extension, you are welcome to have extra time. Just send an email. Unfortunately *I cannot guarantee substantive comments on late papers*. Also, please realize that *late papers will be graded last,* so if your paper is late then it might not be factored into your midterm grade.

Formatting:

- Font: Times New Roman font, size 11.
- Formatting: Double space, use standard margins, and eliminate extra spaces between paragraphs.
- Heading: Place your full name and the page number in the top-right corner of each page.
  Have a title that could not be placed on someone else's paper (i.e. not "Short Paper")
  Do not include other extraneous information as filler. I do not need to know my name.
- Abstract: include a 3-to-5-sentence *abstract* between your essay title and the body of your paper. (Abstracts should clearly outline out your focus, but they can also include a "hook" or a quick summary of how you will proceed). These are to make sure you know what your argument is!
- Citations: MLA parenthetical citations with a Works Cited for anything we didn't read in class.

Name 1

Beyond Funny

In *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn,* Twain's use of humor is essentially a vehicle for shedding light on unjust social conventions, specifically race. This mode of humor further continues into today's society, in the case of contemporary black comedians like Dave Chappelle and Chris Rock. Twain, Chappelle, and Rock skillfully show that transgressive humor has the ability to have a greater impact than just providing amusement.

6. Grading. The most important component of this essay is a ***strong argument*** that actually speaks to some sort of broader idea or conversation—or which answers the question "so what?" Your secondary focus should be on using ***appropriate textual evidence***. Polished prose is always helpful, but for this essay it's not as important as the topic you select and the way that you develop and support your argument.

* Late work may be marked down by ⅓ of a letter grade each day. Workshops are not part of your final grade unless you fail to distribute a reasonable document, or one full page, single-spaced, which articulates a planned set of ideas and questions. In that case, your grade will be lowered by ⅓ of a letter grade.

Grading Rubric or Benchmarks:

"F" papers either don't meet basic requirements or have serious problems or very evident deficiencies. This includes failing to meet length requirements ("4-5 pages" does not mean three pages and five lines), repeatedly failing to follow directions about formatting and citations, or intentionally "cheating" font size. Plagiarized work will earn a zero and not a regular "F."

"D" papers meet basic requirements but are not analytic essays shaped by a thesis or argument that is supported by textual evidence. *If you receive a "D" you must schedule a meeting with me.*

"C" papers are recognizable as argumentative essays supported by evidence
These papers share several of the following problematic characteristics:

Arguments

- An argument that is hard to understand or a thesis paragraph that is difficult to follow.
- An argument so obvious that it is difficult to imagine disagreement. (There is no reason to devote time to building and supporting an argument if you can't begin to imagine a conflicting approach).
- An argument that does not relate to any matters of concern, or answer the question "so what?"

Evidence and Structure

- Structure is unclear, or your paragraphs do not add up to actually support your argument
- Insufficient evidence, including a failure to reference and cite specific passages in the text or selective use of evidence that ignores central moments in—or large sections of—your text.
- Problematic or missing citations, which are necessary when you quote ***or reference*** a source.
- Large blocks of unnecessary plot summary or totally irrelevant "filler."
- Paragraphs that are extraordinarily unbalanced: some fill four lines; others fill an entire page.
- Excessive generalizations, like references to "all humans," "all women," or an omnipotent "society."
- Alleged historical, social, or psychological "facts" that are actually made up and/or unsupported.

Clarity and Style

- Multiple moments where your writing simply doesn't make sense.
- Grammatical problems that are so prevalent they make it difficult for me to understand your content.
- Formatting that doesn't follow the guidelines described in this assignment sheet.

"B" papers use specific, appropriate passages from course texts as *evidence* that supports a clear *argument*. These papers also clearly and successfully share the following traits, which you might think of as goals:

Arguments

- They push past trivial claims to actually make an argument that reaches past our class discussions. (This means that other people in the class could, conceivably disagree with your claim before reading your paper—or, at the very least, they would learn something totally new or be surprised).
- These arguments are also clear—not difficult to find and follow.
- Finally, these papers will gesture—at least in their conclusions—toward some point beyond themselves. Put another way: they will attempt to answer the question: "so what?" or have a reason for existing that goes beyond the fact that they've been assigned.

Evidence and Structure

- They draw, repeatedly, on evidence from the texts that you discuss. Put another way: these papers are not dependent upon sweeping generalizations about all "humans" or "women" or history. Instead they are grounded in a series of relevant moments in the texts that you address.
- They offer citations when you quote, describe, summarize, or reference any moment in any text. (You might think about "textual evidence" as a kind of "data." Your thesis is like a theory that

has to actually be based in textual evidence that can only be grounded by specific pages of our course texts, other relevant literary work, appropriate historical material, or scholarly sources).

- They have clear, coherent, unified body paragraphs that focus on presenting and then supporting one idea or one piece of your argument. These paragraphs will never be shorter than four lines or longer than a full page. And thanks to the revision process, these paragraphs will progress via clearly ordered stages that make sense for your argument.

Clarity and Style

- Your writing is consistently clear and comprehensible
- Sentences are complete, and sentence structure has some complexity.
- Formatting follows the guidelines described in this assignment sheet.

"A" papers don't simply offer a "thesis statement" that is followed by a series of examples. Instead, they develop or build a sustained argument that makes a point that isn't obvious—which ultimately speaks to some sort of pressing question or matter of concern. *Nothing about "A" papers resembles a five-paragraph essay with paragraphs that serve as equivalent examples that each relate back to your thesis. Instead in these papers paragraphs build on each other, and transitions between paragraphs are clear and engaging because you know how your paragraphs—or the pieces of your argument—actually relate to each other.*

- This kind of argument requires revision, and students generally find two strategies especially helpful. The first is to acknowledge tensions, problems, or counterexamples instead of trying to ignore them. Passages or readings that potentially trouble your initial ideas are exactly the things that can help you develop a more complex, more precise thesis. The second strategy is to produce a reverse outline. We'll discuss these in class, but you can also read about them here.

Thesis

- "A" papers are not only about having a clear, complex, well-ordered argument that actually develops as your paper progresses. These papers also actually say something, or find ways of linking our texts to real questions. The most difficult part of writing an "A" paper may actually be selecting a topic, or finding a *question* that you actually care about answering.

Evidence and Structure

- These papers consistently draw on appropriate evidence from the texts that you discuss.
- They offer appropriate citations, often drawing on external scholarly sources.
- They are not based in generalizations.
- They have coherent, unified body paragraphs that have been organized into a clear structure that develops the different components of your complex argument.

Clarity and Style

- These papers are engaging: the writing is strong, the copy is clean, and you have some style.
- It's clear that you've revised your work in order to engage and persuade your readers.