

Essay One Assignment

This is a three-part assignment. Parts One and Two are the draft, due Monday, Feb. 3, and they will serve as the basis for the first writing workshop. Parts One-Three are the final paper, which is due in class on Monday, Feb. 10.

Part One: The first part is to work up a passage of poetry, no longer than 30 lines. Select a passage from any of the poems on the syllabus for Jan. 27, Jan. 31, or Feb 3. Type it in to your computer, triple space it, and print it out again. This typing is part of the assignment—pay attention as you go, notice details such as commas, spelling, and so on. Then, go over it with a fine-toothed comb:

- Paraphrase the passage and make sure you understand it completely, connecting all the verbs with their agents, decoding any syntactic inversions, etc. I want you actually to carefully decode—write out a paraphrase somewhere on the sheet of paper.
- Attend to particular words. What connotations and significance can you uncover? Are there puns or double-meanings hidden in specific words? Look interesting words up in the OED. Make *at least ten* lists of words according to register, parts of speech, spatial dynamics, etc.
- Examine rhyme. How does rhyme (dis-)connect various words and ideas? How does rhyme echo or undermine meaning? What other sound patterns are important, and how?
- Identify all the images, metaphors, and symbols in the passage. An image is any appeal a word or phrase makes to the senses, so be on the look out for auditory and tactile images as well as visual ones. Look, too, for subtle metaphors embedded in words like “roared” or “towered.” Use the *OED* for help in precisely defining the symbolic resonances of words carrying religious, mythic, or political symbolism.
- Mark any other interesting or important dynamics

Your printout should be covered with markings, a maze of circles and lists, notes from the OED, etc.

Part Two: Now, consider what you’ve got—a whole mess of details. This is the textual evidence that will serve as the first-order basis for your paper.

From here, make a list of observations *about* this evidence. What do you notice? What patterns cohere? How do various details relate or interact with one another, i.e. reinforcing, creating tension, offering alternatives, etc.? Simply look at the poem as you now know it, deeply, and see what you find there. *How* does the poem do what it does—that is your main question at this stage.

As you start to notice things, you will probably also begin to have ideas about *why* these textual dynamics are *interesting or important*. Such ideas are the basis for an analytical claim about the passage. So, start brainstorming possible thesis statements that might grow out of your close reading.

Play the games for developing argument by pushing on thesis statements:

- Argue the opposite, and then see if you reach a higher synthesis.
- Expand the scope. How would accounting for additional details alter the thesis?
- Narrow the scope.
- Make a thesis more precise by further specifying what you mean by each word.
- Press to try to get closer to the heart of what’s vital, tense, and rich in the passage.

Part Three:

Finally, the third part of your assignment is to write a 3-4 page essay about your passage, selecting and using evidence from your marked-up passage and your observations about it, according to the argument you decide to pursue. Your essay should be double-spaced, carefully proofread, and formatted in accordance with MLA style (consult the document on our moodle page).

Main goals:

- Fostering a generative, open-ended pre-writing process
- Using evidence and insights produced in pre-writing in a paper