

ENGL 150  
American Crazy  
Fall 2013

### Survey of Critical Literature Assignment

#### *Requirements:*

- In an essay of 5-7 pp (dbl-spaced, 12 point type) discuss three critical, scholarly, or journalistic perspectives on the primary subject of your research project;
- Summarize the main arguments offered by the writer of each piece; identify the important evidence on which the writer draws; and explain the important conceptual premises or critical orientations the piece reflects.
- Insofar as possible, strive to select sources that offer substantial and significant argument or information about your subject. (I.e., you want to use good, not weak stuff.) And, as much as can be done, try to find sources that show between themselves meaningful differences in interpretation or perspective.
- Explain the writers' important differences in perspective or argument and, where appropriate, evaluate how illuminating or convincing they seem.
- Make use of any of the standard citation methods, as explained either in 13.7 and 13.8 of *The Craft of Research* or in the Wesleyan Library's LibGuide to citation (<http://libguides.wesleyan.edu/citing>).

#### *Explanation:*

The aim of this assignment is to give you a first encounter with the range of opinion that exists on your subject. If you were doing a full-scale research project in an academic field, you might begin the project by attempting an exhaustive review of the existing critical literature. That is, you would want to read all the important scholarship on your subject with the aim of clarifying the current state of knowledge and debate. (If, for example, you were writing an essay about James Fenimore Cooper's depiction of Native Americans, you would read all the important critical discussion of that subject, identify what the current most prominent positions are, and consider how you might contribute to understanding of the issues.)

Because this is a one-semester, introductory course, you don't have time to do that kind of exhaustive review of the literature. *What you can do instead is take samples of*

some of the important trends in scholarly or critical discussion and consider what those samples tell you about your subject and the different ways it has been viewed.

In doing this project, ***your most important goal*** is to summarize the main arguments of each of the samples and to explain how and why they differ. Think of your task as explaining to an interested reader who is not familiar with these particular sources what the reader needs to know in order to understand them.

### Doing the Research

To complete this assignment successfully, you need to seek out three points of view on your subject. Your goal should be to make use of high-quality sources and to find perspectives that differ in some significant ways.

To do this work, you need tools that will help you to find useful materials. A number of resources in particular are likely to be helpful to you:

- Most important will be the **indexes and databases** that are relevant to your subject. Particularly useful for **general purposes** will be:
  - the all purpose search tool Library OneSearch (<http://wesleyan.summon.serialssolutions.com/#!/>)
  - the mass database of scholarly articles called JSTOR (<http://www.jstor.org>);
  - and, for journalistic sources, the Reader's Guide Full Text (available under "Online Indexes and Databases").
  
- In addition to these general research tools, you can call on **research tools** or databases that are particular to **specific academic disciplines**—e.g., Literature, History, American Studies, Sociology, Film, etc. On the Wesleyan library web page, you can find links to **LibGuides** (<http://libguides.wesleyan.edu>) that will point you to the most useful resources in each particular academic field. *These are invaluable guides!*
  
- You can make use of the **Wesleyan Library Catalog** to search for books in the stacks relevant to your subject.

(<http://www.wesleyan.edu/library/find/books.html>). This should be a last rather than first option.

- You can consult with me for advice.
- Most usefully, you can **make an appointment with a research librarian**, who will give you high quality advice about your particular project.  
(<http://www.wesleyan.edu/library/howdoi/makeanappointment.html>)

### Assessing the Research Sources

The assignment asks you to make use of high-quality sources. What does that mean? And how will you know higher quality from lower quality?

Well, academia is like any other realm of human activity: it shows a wide range of quality and aspiration. Really good and important statements are rare; mediocrity and conventionality are commonplace. As far as possible, you want your project to draw on the highest quality information and insight you can find.

How can you tell the valuable from the less valuable? Unfortunately, to really do this kind of assessment with confidence, you just need to be very familiar with a field of study. But there are some handy short cuts:

- Scholarly articles that are published in reputable scholarly journals are likely to be of higher quality and to be judged by the editors to be making significant contributions to their fields. The journals that are included in the JSTOR database are for the most part highly regarded and are a good starting place.
- Books that are published by prominent University presses (Harvard, Yale, Princeton, Chicago, Duke, North Carolina, Oxford, Cambridge, etc.) or by prominent trade presses (Random House, Knopf, Farrar Strauss, Norton, Free Press, etc.) are likely to be higher quality.
- Books and articles that were published more than 25 years ago, unless they are recognized as classics (and are referred to often by other scholars) are likely to rely on information or argument that is out of date.

Finally, when in doubt, *ask my advice!*

### Preparing to Write

Before you begin drafting your essay, it will be very helpful to **take notes on your reading**. This will be useful not only for keeping track of what you've read. It will also help you clarify your ideas and get you started on the hardest step of composition—writing the first words.

So, as you read each of your research sources, jot down notes. When you come to what looks like the writer's thesis statement, sketch a quick paraphrase, with page number, in your notes. When you come to an interesting example, note it. When you see places where the author disagrees with another critic or scholar, jot down a memo to yourself. When something strikes you as confusing or dubious, note it. All these things may be useful when you come to write your summary.

In fact, I recommend that as you read, you have next to you a pad with these headings: "*main argument*"; "*major evidence*"; "*key examples*"; "*antagonist*"; "*other*." (The box below provides an example.) If you can put some notes under these headings, you should find that getting a grip on the reading and starting writing will be much easier than they would otherwise be.

#### ***Notes on Slotkin, Fatal Environment***

##### ***Main argument:***

Frontier mythology a key part of American culture and politics, influences current attitudes and political choices (xiii-xiv)

##### ***Sub argument***

Frontier mythology a result of colonial expansion in 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup>

*Doing the Writing*

The most important challenge this assignment presents is, of course, the demand that you summarize three writers' arguments. To do the project well, you need to be able to identify the writers' main claims and to put them in your own words. You should be able to state the core argument of each piece in no more than 3 or 4 sentences. (The fewer the better!) Once you have identified the main argument, you can then go on to explain the implications of that argument, the evidence the author draws on to make it, and the important premises it reflects.

The box below shows an example.

In his book *The Fatal Environment*, Richard Slotkin contends that the myth of the frontier has been a central element of American cultural and political life. Slotkin argues that out of the experience of frontier expansion in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, Americans developed an ideology of savage war, according to which European American settlers were compelled by fate to enter into brutal, existential conflict with Native Americans. In stories about such savage conflict, Americans created a myth about how frontier war could spiritually revitalize European Americans and establish their legitimate claim to the territory of North America. According to Slotkin, that mythology of frontier violence continues to affect how Americans understand themselves and their political choices. "The web of myth that Nineteenth-Century Americans wove about their Frontier" continues to "inform our political rhetoric" and limit our choices (12).

Obviously, in order to fulfill this task, you need to find the core argument—or thesis statement--of each work you're discussing. In nearly all cases, writers will indicate these main claims in an introduction or conclusion. Sometimes, the writer will state her case most clearly in the first paragraph of an essay or book. Sometimes, a writer will present his core argument in the concluding paragraph of an introductory discussion. Sometimes a writer will not present the main claims until the conclusion. In some rare cases, a writer will provide an abstract summarizing their major point.

*Be careful as you seek to identify a writer's argument that you don't confuse the writer's claims with the views of other critics or scholars that she summarizes. Very often, a writer will position her view by comparing her case with the argument offered by another writer. Be sure that you are summarizing the right person!*

In sum, to do this task, you need to be an attentive and critical reader. In general, look to ***introductions and conclusions*** for your key evidence.

One good way to see if you've got a good summary of a writer's main argument (or of your own) is if you can explain it briefly to a friend or family member. Professional scholars sometimes call this "the elevator talk." If you can't summarize your point to someone you're riding in an elevator with by the time you get to your floor, then you probably don't have a good handle on it yet. ***Working to explain things to a friend or family member is often a very good way to clarify your ideas.***

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