

MIT OpenCourseWare
<http://ocw.mit.edu>

21L.017 The Art of the Probable: Literature and Probability
Spring 2008

For information about citing these materials or our Terms of Use, visit: <http://ocw.mit.edu/terms>.

General Guidelines for Essay Assignments

Length. The required length for each essay is based on the following standards:

- Standard 1 inch margins
- Standard 12pt font such as Times Roman or Courier
- Double-spaced throughout.

Please do not “expand” your paper by playing around with margin and font sizes or squeeze in extra material by reducing line spacing.

How to cite texts: In general, follow a standard bibliographic manual such as the MLA Handbook of Style or the Chicago Manual of Style. In particular, make sure you cite texts correctly. Please adhere to the following conventions:

- The first time you cite a text, include its full bibliographic information in a footnote. For instance, Blaise Pascal, *Pensées and Other Writings* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 192; or William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, ed. A. R. Braunmuller (New York: Penguin Books, 1982). I make up the dates here, but you get the idea! All subsequent citations from the same text can simply be indicated parenthetically in the body of the essay, e.g. (Pascal, 220) or, in the case of a play by act, scene and line number (see below).

- When you cite verse, be it poetry or dramatic verse, make sure that quotation matches the text exactly, preserving line breaks and indicating where it is taken from. For short quotations of 3 lines or fewer, quote in the body of the essay, thus: “Thou know’st ‘tis common – all that lives must die, / Passing through nature into eternity” (1.2.73-4). Longer quotations should be indented and without quote marks, as:

To be or not to be – that is the question:
Whether ‘tis nobler in the mind to suffer
The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune,
Or to take arms against a sea of troubles,
And by opposing end them? (3.1.57-61)

- Citing prose does not require line breaks, though citing from a play demands including act, scene, and line number, while citing from, say a novel, requires only the page number of the edition you are using.

Before you write:

- Read the texts you are working on carefully and closely, carefully noting as you read passages or scenes that most attract your attention, and storing away patterns or connections across the text. Where appropriate, pay attention to sound as well as sense, thinking not only about content and meaning, but also about such issues as poetic form, diction, sentence structure and imagery. Consider how the lines reflect a mood, or a theme, the speaker’s character, or a conflict.

- Think through and outline your essay before you start writing, being open to modifying and improving the outline as the essay proceeds.

Writing the essay:

Now you are in the position to begin your essay. In writing, make sure you have a clear and well-shaped argument. An essay is not simply a grab bag of loosely related points, but a coherent whole in which each point that you make builds upon what came before and leads to what is to come.

Remember that you are not writing a book-report. Your essay should assume that the reader knows the text and is interested in reading an interpretation of it or an argument about it. You may want to remind the reader of a feature of the plot or how some lines of poetry actually run, because these details are important to your argument. But you are not in the business of acquainting the reader with the text for the first time. By the same token, be mindful that the reader may have an opinion as well, if only a half-formed one; that is why the reader is interested in reading an essay about the text. It may help your essay to gather some argumentative push if you can imagine a reader making a reasonable objection to what you are writing.

Be specific and focused, citing the text to develop and support your claims. If you are analysing a passage, for instance, the task is **not** to go through the passage line by line, listing everything you have noticed. Rather, isolate what you consider to be the most important aspects of the passage. Organise your assertions and observations so that they contribute to a single important claim you want to make about the significance of the lines you are citing. That is to say, your careful reading of the particulars of the passage should be directed toward a central thesis or argument.

It is not sufficient to say, for instance, that a specific passage "heightens" or "augments" something the play is interested in. That is a vague thesis that simply prompts the question: so what? You need to have a focused claim that identifies the significance of the issues raised and thinks in specific terms about how the chosen passage contributes to the elaboration of those issues.

After you write:

After you have written the paper, re-read and edit it to make sure that you have eliminated typographical and grammatical errors. Examine the transitions between sentences and paragraphs and re-work the paper so that it flows smoothly from beginning to end. Fix all bibliographic problems.

In this class, you are encouraged to discuss your ideas with other students, to work together to get clear on ideas and issues. However, you must write on your own, developing your own argument.

Finally, remember the injunction against plagiarism. If you borrow ideas from elsewhere, or use language from other sources, you are expected to acknowledge explicitly in footnotes or bibliography the nature of your reliance. Such acknowledgement needs to be made not just for direct quotation, but for paraphrasing the ideas of an external source as well.

The Tutor:

Each essay will require you to meet at least once with the Writing Tutor, between essay and rewrite for the first assignment, and before submitting the essay for the second and third assignments. You are welcome to meet with the Tutor more often, should you feel the need.

Grading:

For the first essay, the letter grade you will receive indicates roughly how successful your paper was. The final grade on the paper will be awarded to the re-write. For subsequent essays, the grade received is the final grade on that assignment.

In all cases, (1) be aware that the paper needs to be technically clean, that is, free of grammatical and typographical errors. If you make more than a few such errors (the exact number will depend upon the gravity of the errors!), you automatically lose any chance of making an A on the assignment. More than a few, and the chances of a B, too, are eroded; (2) recognise that a technically clean paper is not sufficient to earn a high grade. Your grade will depend even more on the quality of the paper: the clarity of its argument; the ability to use textual evidence to make your case; the strength of your insights into the play; and the grace with which you communicate your ideas.

Above all, enjoy the thinking. An essay is hard work but it also can be fun.