

Guidelines for Paper Writing

These are some pointers to keep in mind as you write your papers for this class. These pointers, I believe, are going to hold true for other professors as well (in fact, I borrowed these from another professor and then added on suggestions that I felt were also relevant. Notice how I am giving credit where credit is due!) Be sure to read this carefully and to follow its lead when you write your papers. You should have this memorized, or hanging on the wall next to your computer monitor at the very least!

1. The most important—and challenging—task in preparing a paper is narrowing your focus from a **topic** to a **thesis**. A topic is a general field of inquiry or theme that catches your interest. Here are examples of topics around which you might base an essay:

- Shakespeare's use of race in "Othello"
- Faulkner's use of symbolism in The Sound and the Fury
- Economic progress in Hurston's Their Eyes Were Watching God

Once you have a topic, the next step is to find a **focus** within that topic. A focus, in this context, might be defined as a particular issue or tension you wish to explore. Especially in short papers, the narrower your focus, the more thoughtful your paper will be. You might try expressing your focus in the form of a question:

- Why does Iago act out his jealousy of Othello on the relationship between the Moor and Desdemona?
- What does the statue of the Confederate soldier at the very end of Faulkner's novel symbolize?
- Is the economic progress Jody brings to his newly adopted town in Hurston's novel a comment on modernity?

The answer to the question you have asked will be your **thesis**. At this stage you should begin to identify several key passages (about five for a five paged paper) from the text that you will discuss in detail. If not, you will eventually want to focus on some specific parts of the novel so as to make your topic manageable.

2. Note that a thesis, by definition, is a debatable claim—it cannot be self-evident; in other words, your thesis must be able to convince a reader that your position is instructive. The following statements are not theses, but observations:

- Race plays a significant part in Shakespeare's play
- There is a Confederate soldier at the end of Faulkner's novel.
- Hurston's Jody is an entrepreneur in an all-black town in Florida.

The way to test whether a statement is a thesis or an observation is to ask: "Could someone disagree?" Only if the answer is "yes" do you have a thesis. The

following, while debatable, are weak and/or incomplete theses, and would probably make an uninteresting paper:

- Racial differences serve as defining tensions in “Othello.” (What purpose do these tensions serve? Why would Shakespeare write about them?)
- The Confederate soldier in the last page of The Sound and the Fury is a symbol. (Of what? What difference does it make to the rest of the novel?)
- The all-black town in Hurston’s novel is run well. (Why should we care if it is? What does this have to do with economics or modernity?)

The way to test as to whether a thesis is engaging, and worth defending in a paper, is to ask the all-important but always difficult question to answer: So what and who cares? The answer you should have ready is, “You should, and this is why.”

Thus, keep in mind: a good thesis has to be both debatable and engaging.

3. Once you have established that your thesis is “good,” carefully structure your essay around it. Having a good thesis—a debatable and engaging statement—is still not good enough if you don’t go on to discuss how you arrived at that thesis. Make sure that each point you make in the body of the essay supports your thesis or builds upon ideas that will be immediately relevant to it. Ruthlessly weed out anything irrelevant to the main argument of your paper.
4. Remember that every point that you make should be backed up by evidence from the text you are discussing (that is, with quotations/specific textual references and analysis). Whenever you quote something, make sure you include a parenthetical page reference immediately following the quotation and before the period [e.g., (Frederick 1)]. If it’s clear from the context of the paragraph what work you are quoting from, you need only refer to a page number [e.g., (1)]. When you are not required to use any secondary sources, you will probably only need to make parenthetical page number references.

Make sure, above all else, to interpret a quotation. Don’t depend on it to do the work of explanation on its own. Rather, you need to tell us as explicitly as possible how that passage backs up, supports, illuminates, or illustrates the point you are trying to make. See the “Style Sheet for Essay Writing” for more details on this point.

5. When you use outside sources for your papers, they must be fully acknowledged—whether directly quoted or paraphrased. This is absolutely essential, and failure to give proper citations constitutes plagiarism, the passing off of another person’s ideas or work as one’s own. Borrowing from another student’s paper or from a web-based service, in addition to being counter-intuitive (you all are here to learn, right?), is also plagiarism. In any of these cases, if you are caught stealing—or worse yet buying—another person’s ideas, you will be severely disciplined by the university. I can’t stress enough how serious a crime this is in the academic world. When in doubt, cite.

6. Once you have written your draft, put it aside for a while. After this break, re-read it for content and style. Ask yourself:

- Am I expressing my ideas simply and clearly?
- Are my points organized in a logical sequence?
- Are my transitions between paragraphs clear?
- Are there places where the reader is likely to get confused?
- Are there any “floating” quotations left un-interpreted?

Proofread the draft carefully. I expect these papers to be polished and without grammatical errors. In the age of word-processors, there should definitely be no spelling errors! But also watch out for subject-verb agreements, run-on/fused sentences, sentence fragments, split infinitives, and so on. These are errors the computer cannot catch—grammar checkers are, at best, a great new source of grammatical errors as well as odd writing. Being able to write in clear, grammatical prose is perhaps the greatest gift you can give yourself, and the only way to purchase that gift is to do the hard work of writing, proofreading, and repeating the process as often as possible.

Train a friend or tutor to read your draft. You can achieve this by offering your reader a list of issues to attend to (“Am I consistently using the present tense?” “Does each of my paragraphs address my thesis in some way?”). After you’ve prepared your reader, have them read your draft for you, or read it out loud to them. This training/reading process will help you get some distance from your thoughts—and help you produce a stronger paper.

7. Remember, if you choose to use a title, make sure it reflects your paper’s topic/thesis. It should not be too general or too flowery. An example of a good title, though dull, would be: “The Symbolism of the Confederate Soldier in The Sound and the Fury.” A bad, and dull, title would be: “Symbolism in Faulkner.” Remember: it is better to have a dull title than an uninformative one. No need to attach a title page—it’s just a waste of paper—but rather type the title of the paper at the top of the first page.