

GENERAL ADVICE ON PREPARING ESSAYS

The advice here is admittedly general and should be obvious to most students of literature, but often students complain they do not know what professors expect. In short professors expect essays that are clear, focused, pertinent, and well-developed. A successful essay is not just about anything said in any way; it should be purposeful and pointed and germane to the subject of the course or the assignment or both.

In no literature class is the obligation of the professor to tell you what to say; you must assume, unless told otherwise, that the essay is an opportunity to show what you know and what kind of analytical skills you can bring to the text under consideration. So what should you consider?

- first of all, be sure you are addressing the topic(s) under consideration. If it's not pertinent to the topic, forget it.
- forget extensive plot summary. Everyone in the class, and especially the professor, has read the material; therefore, there's no point in presenting an extensive summary of action or events. Use limited, pointed summary to present or buttress a point, not as filler.
- arrive at a clear, focused thesis statement which you can express in a sentence or two. If you can't tell the reader exactly what the paper is *about*, you have a serious problem. I strongly recommend a specific, *expressed* (rather than implied) thesis.
 - the thesis should not only reveal what the essay is about but indicate what direction the discussion will take
- the body paragraphs should *analyze* and *critically develop* the material under consideration. Remember this is quite different from simply summarizing the material.
 - the point is to *explicate* the text, to hold it up to scrutiny, to carefully reveal the pertinence of the material in light of the topic and the thesis presented
 - I cannot emphasize strongly enough the importance of this section of the essay. This is the *proof* of your theory; put plenty of effort and time into this section in order to make a convincing case
- remember your reader. The purpose of any essay is to convince the reader of your point of view, but never assume that the reader already knows or shares that point of view.
- take time to review and revise your draft. This means much more than simply correcting spelling errors or missing apostrophes. Instead, look at issues of focus, organization, development, and clarity.
 - make no mistake--so-called "little" things matter: spelling, punctuation, grammar, and usage. There is simply no excuse for lapses in these matters in an English paper
- finally, forget the old dichotomy between form and content; in this class *both* matter and you must have sufficient control and mastery of each

PARAGRAPH DEVELOPMENT

- If your thesis includes any unusual or specialized terms, define them and explain them at the outset.
- Each paragraph should have a topic sentence (stated or at least implied), one that follows logically from the ideas stated in the thesis.
- Watch for both undeveloped or bloated paragraphs. Except as an occasional transitional device, the one or two sentence paragraph is not effective in essays under ten pages. Likewise an entire page or more of undivided text is a inflated monster that needs revision or division.
- Be sure that each sentence follows logically from the paragraph's topic sentence.
- Remember that the primary job of body paragraphs is to **amplify, develop, explain, analyze, argue**, etc., the ideas and implications of the thesis. Therefore, be sure to supply **concrete support** for your assertions. Generalizations without support mean little. Find **trenchant quotes**, offer these, but then be sure to **take the reader back and analyze** what, how, why the quote is significant, how it advances or illuminates your theories. This step is positively vital in advancing a persuasive discussion.
- Watch the tone; avoid the extremes (the chatty or the pompous). Assume a middle tone (semi-formal and objective, serious but not mordant).
- Unless you are discussing a work not covered in class, you can assume that your reader is familiar with the plot, and there is thus no reason to offer a lengthy plot summary. If necessary, weave plot summary into the analysis.

SENTENCE MATTERS

- Concision is one of the keys to effective prose--say what you have to say but avoid wordiness. Select phrases and words carefully and with discrimination.
- Avoid the passive voice whenever possible.
- Keep unity of point of view by speaking in the third person.
- Avoid rhetorical questions; they are usually annoying and fail to advance the argument.
- Use the present tense (the "historical present") when discussing the work and any events.
- Try to achieve sentence variety by employing a combination of simple, compound, complex, and compound-complex sentences. Sentence monotony can drastically weaken any discussion.
- Watch for effective and logical transitions between sentences and ideas; individual statements follow from one another or anticipate one another.
- Verbs carry the action of any sentence; therefore, be sure the verbs are strong and appropriate. Watch for any abundant use of linking verbs, esp. the verb "to be"; this is a clear sign of writing weakness.
- Always place periods and commas inside closing quotation marks. If you are unsure of the rules of punctuation, see any handbook or invest in Stunk & White's Elements of Style (which

offers an esp. concise review of punctuation).

- Avoid contractions.
- Check for agreement errors between subject and verb and pronoun and antecedent.
- If you take the words or ideas of another writer, be absolutely certain to acknowledge this inclusion in the form of an endnote in a WORKS CITED entry. Correct form can be found in any handbook. Remember, a failure to acknowledge a source is a form of plagiarism.

DOCUMENTATION CONVENTIONS

- quote five or less lines of poetry or prose by incorporating the passage into the body of your text using quotation marks.
- quote five or more lines of poetry or prose with a hanging indent (indent your passage ten spaces from the left hand margin). Reproduce any marks of punctuation exactly as they appear in the text.
- if you shorten a quotation, use ellipses to indicate the omission (. . .).

SINGLE AUTHOR

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TWO OR THREE AUTHORS (N.B. The names of the second and third authors are reproduced in normal order.)

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Nabokov, Vladimir. The Annotated Lolita. Ed. Alfred Appel, Jr. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1955.

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