

## TIPS ON WRITING THE ACADEMIC ESSAY

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### 1. HOW TO COME UP WITH A GOOD THESIS/ARGUMENT

Professors are interested in “interesting” essays. What does that mean? It does *not* mean that you have to come up with completely original thoughts that no one has ever thought of. This would be difficult in your position. As a writer of academic papers, you are a novice in a field where professionals have been writing for many years. Professors don’t expect you to come up with a thesis about the *Odyssey* that they’ve never seen before. No, the key really is that the ideas you engage with and your take on them has to be *interesting to YOU*. If you are excited about a topic, that is a good sign. If you choose a thesis because you think it will be “easy” that is probably a bad sign. “Easy” often equals “obvious,” “safe” and “boring.” It can also equal simply re-iterating points that professors have made in lectures or discussion section, which is not what we are looking for in academic writing. The professor’s arguments should be a starting point for your own thought, not something to copy. As long as YOU are covering new ground, exploring things YOU had not thought of before, you are being original enough.

For example, when we read the *Iliad*, part of lectures and discussions will typically focus on the Greeks as a “warrior culture.” You may find this fascinating. But when paper-writing time comes around, something like “*The Greeks are a warrior culture*” will not suffice as a thesis, since everyone pretty much agrees about that. On the other hand “*The Greeks are actually NOT a warrior culture*” would be a hum-dinger, but be careful! If you choose it merely for shock value and don’t actually have an argument, don’t do it. Professors do not give good grades based on shock and surprise.

How could you then finesse this topic into a good thesis, if you really are interested in thinking deeper about warrior culture, the Greek one specifically? You could try something like: “*The warrior culture of the Greeks is in contention with aspect X or Y of Greek culture.*” So they’re not “simply” a warrior culture, where everyone agrees that war is the only and the best way of life and warriors are universally admired? There are other, complicating factors? Great! Complexity, that’s the key thing to be going for in your thesis— not black or white answers.

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### YOUR OPINION AS A SCHOLAR VS. YOUR MORAL JUDGMENT

As a scholar-in-training, your job is not to make moral judgments about stories, writers, historical personages or fictional characters. Rather, your job is to try to understand what writers are trying to describe in their work (hopefully, we will learn something about the world we live in by doing this). Our morals are part of the baggage we bring from our particular cultures and communities, and

that baggage can close off potential meanings of the texts if we allow it to become the only or the predominant lens through which we look at them.

For example: “*I think Odysseus is bad man because he cheats on his wife*” is a moral judgment of Odysseus’ behavior. Your audience (the scholarly/academic community or other smart and interested people) is not reading your essay to find out how you judge Odysseus morally—anyone can do that very well on their own, and most people are itching to! Better: “*While Penelope’s loyalty is portrayed as virtuous through comparison with the story of Clytemnestra, Odysseus’ dalliances with Circe and Calypso are presented as a matter of course.*” (Include quotations that demonstrate this). Here, you are pointing the reader to a *possible intention of the text/author(s)*—an observation that may enlighten the reader and direct his or her thoughts to the presentation of other males and females. A conclusion may be drawn here, after further development, about Homeric culture, about whether the *Odyssey* merely reflects the gender relationships of that culture or perhaps comments upon them. You’ve opened up an avenue of exploration, instead of closing off meaning by deciding what is “good” or “bad.”

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TYPICAL HUMAN SITUATION ESSAY PROMPTS:

1. It would be difficult to call the characters of the *Mandragola* “good” or “virtuous” by the standards of most cultures. Does Machiavelli, then, mean for us to despise his characters and vow never to be like them? Or is there something about them we are supposed to value? What kind of behavior is privileged in the play, and how can you tell? In other words, is Machiavelli putting forth a new version of *virtù* or heroism? If so, explain how.
2. In contrast to the *Iliad*, The *Aeneid* includes a number of very strong female characters (Dido, Camilla, and the Sibyl, for example, not to mention those with supernatural powers like Juno, Alecto, and the Harpies). Roman law at the time of Augustus was based on the idea that women were afflicted with *infirmitas sexus* (weakness) and *levitas animi* (light-mindedness), preventing them for the most part from having control over their lives. How does this reality square with the portrayal of strong human females in the *Aeneid*? *To what extent does Virgil seem to subscribe to this view of women, and where can you find signs that he allows for reasonable and “good” behavior in women?* The answer here is probably not black and white (i.e. “Virgil thinks women are completely weak and light-minded” or “Virgil totally disagrees with this notion”). Rather, give Virgil some credit for complexity. Use one of the human characters listed above (Dido, Camilla or the Sibyl) and one more example of (human) female behavior to make your case.
3. Choose a speech by a character in the *Iliad*. It can be anywhere from 6 lines to a full page. Look at the speech carefully, word for word, for literal content and for all that is between the lines in terms of metaphors, references, allusions, etc. Your task in this essay is to use the speech to make a claim about this character’s

relationship to the world of the Homeric epic. What does the speech show about his/her personality? What does it show about the context in which the words are spoken? What does it say about the speaker's relationship to the listener? How does the content situate the character in the world of the *Iliad*? How does the character negotiate some of the greater themes that this work deals with (some examples; honor, *kleos*, war, death, gender expectations, rage, divinity, power, authority)?

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## 2. WHILE WRITING

### QUOTATION

Your argument will need to be supported with quotations from the text. Find those quotations before you even start writing, because without them, your argument won't hold up. You can even use these to organize your paper around if you want.

Quotations are used for two main reasons. One is to remind the reader of a detail that may have been forgotten and missed, and which is relevant to the writer's argument. Think of the reader as a friend who went with you to see a movie. If you refer to major plot points ("The main character guy had been trained in karate!") your friend will most likely know what you're talking about and will nod along. But if you noticed something in particular ("Did you know the dog was actually a Siberian Husky?") your friend might not remember ("Dog? What dog?"). You might have to go back and jog your friend's memory ("In that scene right after they kissed, before the big explosion...")--the equivalent of using a quotation in an academic paper. The only difference is you have to anticipate when your friend (the reader) is going to need a reminder, as he/she is not present to tell you. For example, in the *Odyssey*, not everyone may remember the exact details of the dream Penelope describes to *Odysseus*. When referring to it, a quotation may be appropriate.

The other reason is to highlight a detail that can lead to different interpretations. For example, Penelope's dream could be used to argue that she knows the beggar in front of her is actually her husband. To support this point of view, you might quote the part where a voice tells her in the dream that her husband has come back. On the other hand, if you'd like to argue that the dream really shows she enjoys the attention of the suitors (which *could* contradict the previous focus, since she would hardly be telling the beggar that if she thought he was her husband), you'd quote the part about how she loved to watch the geese that turned out to be the suitors, according to the voice in the dream.

*Do not* use quotations to show obvious things. For example: *Penelope and Odysseus are man and wife*. "Penelope [...] wept for Odysseus, her lovely husband" (1.380-83). The fact of their marriage is one that few readers of the *Odyssey* will dispute, and most who are familiar with the story will remember it--thus it does not need a quotation.

## ORGANIZATION

Your paper can be organized in many ways. The so-called “5-paragraph essay” that many students learn in high school is only one way. As long as your paper has an argument that can be followed logically by the reader, there isn’t really a “wrong” way to organize it. When professors complain about your organization it’s because they are having a difficult time following your argument. Step one is to re-read and revise (see “Sense and Clarity” below). Use paragraphs to signal a change of topic, not because you have to have a certain number of paragraphs. Each thought should follow from the next, without non-sequiturs. The conclusion should not be the same as the introduction (see below).

## WORD CHOICE

As you are writing, don’t worry about trying to sound smart. Especially, don’t use words of doubtful meaning just to seem sophisticated. The effect is often a lack of clarity rather than sophistication. Try to write using your own formal vocabulary. You should be looking in Thesauruses only when you have a very specific meaning in mind already and want to find the word to match the meaning. Or, if you go to a Thesaurus to avoid repeating a word (also a noble cause), don’t just pick whatever word from the list, as they don’t all mean the same thing. Thesauruses offer up an array of related words with different shades of meaning. Use a dictionary to make sure you have the word you want. Control the language; don’t let it control you!

## INTRODUCTIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

Introductory and concluding paragraphs often present a quandary to beginning writers. Here are some tips:

If you have been taught to state your thesis at the beginning and then re-state it at the end, forget that. The paper should be a sort of (artificial) reflection of how you, mentally, arrived at the conclusion. It should show a thought developing, not remaining the same.

There are many ways to write an introduction, but the most important things it has to do are:

1. To give the reader a general idea of what the essay is about. What particular issue or problem will you be dealing with? You may simply state your thesis if you want, or you may let it emerge gradually.
2. To give the reader an idea of why this is an important issue to examine. “Why should I spend twenty minutes reading this?” the reader may ask herself. Of course, if you, the writer, actually think the issue is important and aren’t merely pretending you think so, that helps a lot.

One thing an introduction does NOT need is a lot of introductory general stuff. If your thesis is about the role of funerary laments in *Electra*, get right to it. State at once what the issue is and in which source (usually a text) you are looking for it. You don't have to ease the reader in with broad remarks about Ancient Greece, its wonderful cultural achievements, the role of theater in the polis, and so on, *unless these are parts of your argument*. An appropriate opening sentence in this case should probably include "funerary lament," and a statement about it that is crucial to your thesis.

Here is an example of an introduction that is doing all of the above (tweaked from an actual student paper):

*Readers tend to dislike a fictional character for a few different reasons, a prominent one being when we find the character's actions to be so offensive that we cease to look any further into the character's exploits. With this in mind, we must wonder why Machiavelli depicts enough obscenity in the Mandragola to risk provoking a response of disgust from the audience. Perhaps the best way to figure this out is by investigating Machiavelli's most probable intention for creating such a duplicitous cast.*

The main problem this paper is going to deal with is the risk of creating fictional characters that readers dislike, and that is presented to us right away as a general problem, and then made specific to the text in question.

When the reader gets to the conclusion, he or she should now understand very clearly what your thesis is and why it's important, given that we've been following the author's train of thought for a while. In view of the reader's now greater understanding, the conclusion can take the initial proposition and give it one more push. Let's say that in the introduction you proposed that the character Electra in the play of the same name by Sophocles, is in part presenting the role of women as the mourners/lamenters at funerals—which was a traditional female role in Ancient Greece—when she laments the death of her father throughout much of the play. By the time we get to the conclusion, you have shown this at work in the play through your argument and many relevant quotations. By the end, we should have come to a deeper understanding of why this matters and how it affects our reading of the play. The conclusion, then, is no longer "Electra is performing a traditional role," but something further—for example, in light of that, how should we take Sophocles' choice to focus on lamentation? In light of that, how should we view her sister's refusal to keep mourning, and her brother's act of revenge? In light of that, what does it mean when Electra tries to convince her sister that they should take revenge themselves? And so on. The last paragraph can then sum up for us what exactly it is that your thesis suggests in terms of the meaning of the play and how it opens up new avenues of interpretation.

Here is an example of an actual concluding paragraph from a student paper about how the "heroic" is portrayed in a particular text:

*“Everyone has their own perspective of what makes someone a hero. It isn’t who the person is; it’s what they do to inspire others. Heroes give people the sense that everything will be okay. A hero could merely be a symbol of hope for others, but the idea lives on forever in our imaginations as well as the world that we live in. It’s up to you to find your own hero.”*

This conclusion is not quite working for a couple of reasons. First of all, it makes no mention of the text in question. It also relies on clichés instead of an actual examination of a text. These clichés are commonplaces that are floating out there, part of our cultural baggage; but they are actually inaccurate. “Heroes give people the sense that everything will be okay”? This isn’t true of Achilles, Odysseus, or Batman. “It’s up to you to find your own hero”: this sentence assumes that the reader of the paper is in need of a real hero, rather than being interested in examining how heroes are portrayed in literature. Your conclusion should stick to the text, and the last thing you want to do is try to fit clichés or preconceptions into it. Let it speak for itself.

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### **3. REVISION**

#### Sense and Clarity

Your ideas may be brilliant, but if your paper lacks sense and clarity, no one is going to understand them. Sense and clarity can be affected by lack of organization, grammatical errors, awkward phrasing, misused words, and so on. These are addressed in other sections of this document.

But one of the most pernicious obstacles to sense and clarity is our tendency to assume that others will comprehend our thoughts easily; they seem so obvious! This is usually not the case. The reader needs a lot of guidance, not because he is stupid, but because it is very difficult for us to put ourselves in the shoes of (or the thoughts of) someone else. Language exists to remedy that, but it only works if you actually use it to explain stuff. Often when you are in the throes of writing, the words you write are intelligible only to yourself, much like the ideas themselves might be if others were actually able to see them in their “raw” state. Because of this, it is very important to put your paper aside for a while (a day or two, perhaps) so that you can then look at it with more objective eyes, putting yourself in the place of a person who has no access to your thoughts. Sometimes you even have to clarify the twists and turns of your reasoning (which may seem obvious to you), by saying things like “I will come back to the question of X in a moment, but let me examine Y in order to further illuminate the issue...” or “I will start by looking at character A, since she is crucial to my argument, but I will also spend some time on character B, who subtly but irrevocably influences A.” And so on. Take the reader by the hand, through the maze of your thoughts and your method.

### Grammar and Mechanics

Correct usage is important not only for the sake of sense and clarity, but also because it inevitably becomes part of the *voice* in your essay. A reader (such as your teacher) will be much less likely to take seriously a writer who can't spell or use verb tenses correctly. This is true for job applications and any other situation in which you have to present yourself through your writing. Your typical college professor will not have the time to teach grammar. If you need help in this area, you are going to have to go through an extra effort through tutoring or appropriate grammar books and websites. The most painless way to learn grammar is to read a lot, every day (but use a reliable source, one that presents you with correct usage!). Memorizing passages can be a great way to get the pattern of language ingrained into your own usage.

### Revision tips

Re-read your paper to yourself several times over the course of several days. Edit each time. Plan ahead so that you have time to do this!

Re-read, asking yourself: does all of this make sense? Is it all completely accurate? Make changes accordingly.

All parts of the paper must be relevant to construction of your thesis/argument. Read through each paragraph while asking yourself: does everything in this paragraph pertain to and lead to my conclusion? Are there any digressions that I can get rid of (or save for class discussion if I find them particularly interesting)? Are there sentences in here that I wrote merely to reach the required 3 or 5 pages? They have to go!

Re-read, asking yourself the question: do I know the meaning of all the words I have used? Look up the ones you are not sure of; substitute when necessary.

Read your paper out loud to yourself. Try the words out on your tongue. Do they make you stumble? Not give you a place to pause? Change the language to make for a smoother read.

