**Writing The English Essay** (adapted from Tony Myers, *Upgrade Your English Essay*)

**Answering the Question**

When you first get an essay topic, and while you are still in the planning (sometimes called the pre-writing) stage, you need to carefully look at the question which you must answer in your essay. This may sound obvious, but many writers do not look closely at the question, and therefore only partially or vaguely answer it.

You must show in your essay that you are responding to the terms of the question. Each essay question uses certain generic terms, such as "define," "explain," "analyze," "discuss," "compare," and so on.

A good first step is to identify the terms of the question, not only the instructional terms such as those above, but other critical terms, such as "character," "symbol," "theme," "conflict," and so.

Let's try this with an example. If you, decide to answer the questin "Discuss the theme of paralysis in Araby," you might decide that the key terms are "discuss," "theme," and "paralysis." To discuss an idea means to present your ideas about it, supported, of course, by evidence. A literary "theme" is an idea or topic explored in a literary text. To find the meaning of a word like "paralysis," it is a good idea to consult a dictionary, where you might find that "paralysis" has both a physical and emotional meaning. Then you need to decide how Joyce uses this idea in his text. Is anyone physically paralyzed? No. So, "paralysis" must mean something like an inability to act or a kind of emotional lack of movement. By the way, the theme of paralysis is actually a common one in Irish literature as a whole!

So you need to take four steps at this stage of your planning:

 **Identify the terms of the question.**

 **Define the terms of the question.**

 **Use these definitions as a prism to look at the text.**

 **Write your essay by using what you see through the prism.**

Identifying and defining the terms of the question shows that you are engaging with the question, and it eliminates potential misunderstandings between you and your instructors. If you define what you mean by "paralysis," your instructor will be able to see how you are addressing the question. It will also help you construct a better essay.

Imagine the work you have done so far in defining the terms as using a prism (a many-sided glass which focuses light). The prism of "paralysis" means that you would look in the text for instances which illustrate this idea, and not focus on extraneous ideas. Then you are ready to write your essay using what you see through the prism.

So, ask yourself the following questions:

 **Which are the key terms of the question?**

 **What do the key terms of the question mean?**

 **Where and how are the key terms of the question located in the text?**

**Constructing an Argument**

An argument in essay writing is a general proposition or idea about a novel, story, play, or poem. They are propositions which may be debated and their respective merits supported with evidence. For example,

*Hamlet is a play exploring indecisiveness.*

*Andrew Marvell’s poems utilize bizarre and inconsistent imagery*.

These are arguments.

Arguments are about one or two subjects: the themes of a text or the techniques used to portray these themes. **However, a very good argument will describe a text in terms of a theme and link that to the techniques which help to portray that theme.**

Some essay questions are designed to help you because they already propose an argument with which you must agree or disagree. For example, if you take as a topic one which applies to a story assigned for this course, “Explain what the setting of Poe’s ‘The Cask of Amontillado’ contributes to its tone, mood, and effect,” you can see that your argument would involve your saying that the setting of the story contributes to its tone, mood, and effect (or does not!), and how it does this.

When you have decided upon a question to answer for your essay, and have done the preliminary work in answering the question which was presented in last weeks notes, you will have made a list of words, ideas, themes, or whatever is necessary, in the story to support your argument. To turn this list into an argument, you need to develop a point of view or an opinion on the list.

Whatever your angle, the important thing is that you actually propose an argument and that you can support it.

Myers presents three **opinions** which do not count as good arguments:

 Arguments that merely repeat or describe the plot

 Arguments about how much you like or dislike the text

 Arguments which bear no relation to the text

**Making a Coherent Argument**

An argument’s coherence refers to its logic and consistency. A coherent argument is either an argument that does not contradict itself, or an argument that is not contradicted by the evidence.

There are three choices which you can make if your argument is faced with contradictory evidence.

First, you can abandon the argument and try to find a more reasonable argument.

Second, you can ignore the evidence. This is not as foolhardy as it sounds. What this means is that no argument is going to be supported 100% by all of the evidence. So you can decide that there is enough evidence to support your argument as a reasonable one, even if there is evidence to support other arguments.

Third, you can interpret the evidence in a different way.

An outstanding essay will take into account opposing arguments, but only to prove them inferior to the argument it ultimately advances.

Myers tells us that there are certain advantages to this:

 It demonstrates your ability to consider the same issue from different perspectives.

 It adds depth to your essay by providing dramatic contrast.

 It illustrates your competence to resolve contradictory view-points.

 It stops you from steam-rolling over a text with a single argument and instead keeps you alert to the ambiguities of a novel, story, poem or play.

 It gives your teacher two arguments for the price of one.

**Making a Connected Argument**

A connected argument is one which is able to account for different features of a text. For instance, if your were to take the third essay topic, “Discuss Kafka’s “A Hunger Artist” in terms of characterization,” a connected argument would look for characterization not only of the hunger artist himself, but of the impresario, and of the audience, and would also look at how this characterization is accomplished.

If your argument can only account for a few of a text’s features, it will be unpersuasive.

An argument is basically a paraphrase of the text in terms of a context. In the above example, the context is characterization.

**Making a Complex Argument**

The complexity of an argument is its sophistication, its complexity, as well as the sum of the argument’s coherency and connectivity. Of course, it is more important for your essay to be coherent and connected. If complexity also follows, that is good, but it is not required.

There are some ways in which you can improve your essay’s originality:

 Knowing the context of your answer. This means knowing what is the generally accepted interpretation. Perhaps your view contests this traditional way of looking at the text.

 Contesting the assumptions in the question. You may have noticed that in the example of the question about the setting of “The Cask of Amontillado,” in parentheses I gave the opposite interpretation.

 Writing about neglected texts or questions. You may have a feeling that one of the questions will be chosen by most students, and you may choose differently.

 Writing about neglected aspects of a text; the most neglected aspects usually have to with the author’s language: figures of speech, imagery, rhetoric, grammar, and so on.

 Cultivating your prose style.

**Structuring an Essay on Literature**

When you are considering how to structure your essay, you need to consider both the overall structure and the structure of each paragraph.

Think of each paragraph as a point in your argument, which you need to subdivide into its relevant points. All of the insights and evidence you have gathered relating to a specific point should be grouped together in one paragraph.

As a general rule, in an essay of 100 to 1500 words, you would have between 5 and 7 paragraphs; in an essay of 500 to 1000 words, you would have 4 to 6 paragraphs.

Try to order your paragraphs in terms of the development of your argument, so that each point follows logically on from the previous one.

The following scheme shows the first sentence of each paragraph from an essay answering the question, “Discuss the ways in which Geoffrey Chaucher’s *The Wife of Bath’s Prologue and Tale* is a struggle for ‘maistrie.’”

 **Introduction**. Chaucer’s *The Wife of Bath’s Prologue and Tale* dramatizes the struggle between two definitions of “maistrie”—one a form of power over others, and the other, the full command of a subject.

 **Paragraph 1.** In Chaucer’s time, only men were permitted to read and assume mastery of the biblical, classical, and political tracts which were used to enforce the subjugation of women.

 **Paragraph 2.** Ironically, the Wife of Bath employs the same anti-female tracts used to dominate her as a subversive way of gaining mastery over her husbands.

 **Paragraph 3.** Using her strength and attractiveness, the Wife of Bath augments the rhetorical power she has over her husbands with a physical mastery.

 **Paragraph 4.** Having subverted her husbands’ authority, the Wife of Bath goes on to use her mastery of argumentation and storytelling in order to gain the ascendancy for her views on the battle of the sexes amidst the rest of the pilgrims.

 **Conclusion.** All of the Wife of Bath’s different tactics result in another type of mastery—a victory for her in the battle of the sexes.

**Structure of Paragraphs**

Each paragraph should focus on one main point, which should, in turn, illuminate or support your overall argument from a specific and explicit angle.

This point should be backed up with evidence quoted from the text, which you should then analyze.

Then detail any other minor points which relate to the main point of the paragraph, but which are not big enough in themselves to warrant a whole paragraph.

The minimum length of paragraphs should be 3 sentences.

You should keep the **introduction** general and let the body of the essay sort out the details. The introduction should define the terms of the question, outline the argument, and indicate how it responds to the essay topic. It is not necessary to describe the story unless it relates to the essay question.

The **conclusion** should be relatively brief.

**Using Quotations and Paraphrases**

In an essay about literature, every time you make a point, it should be supported with evidence from the text. This can take the form of quotation or paraphrase. To paraphrase means to put something into your own words.

When you use a quotation, you may need to edit it. For instance, perhaps you only need some words, rather than whole sentences. If you are writing about language in “Araby,” for example, you may simply say “To emphasize the sense of deadness, Joyce uses such words as “blind,” “detached,” “brown,” “waste” (235). If you need to quote a sentence or line from a text, but you are only referring to the beginning and end of the sentence, use an ellipsis (three dots) to indicate the omission: “The career of our play brought us through the dark muddy lanes . . . to the dark odorous stables where a coachman smoothed and combed the horse or shook music from the buckled harness” (235).

You should notice that in each case, I have given the page number in parentheses after the quotation. This style of referring to the quotation is known as MLA (Modern Language Association) format, and is the format used in writing about literature.

**Writing the Research Essay**

The following guidelines are adapted from *Fit to Print* by Joanne Buckley.

A research paper is a formal essay based on your exploration of other people’s ideas, rather than simply an analysis of your own thoughts. Although both an expository essay and a persuasive essay may use source material to some extent, the research essay is unique. Its purpose is to formulate a thesis based on a survey and assessment of source material.

The following steps are essential to the development of a research paper:

 Mapping out the area of exploration

 Finding and using research resources

 Going through the research process

 Drawing up an outline

 Recording source material

 Writing and documenting your essay

A research paper must be modified to suit its readers and its special aims:

**Audience:** an informed, curious reader, whom you address on a professional level

**Purpose:** to demonstrate your skill in exploring, evaluating, and recording source material in a manner that shows how you have synthesized it.

**Mapping out the area of exploration**

Before you begin to explore the library, you must find a subject area that is appropriate for investigation. A good research topic will have the following characteristics:

**1. Scope.** Your subject should be neither too broad nor too narrow in its focus.

Sleep—too broad

Why we sleep—not enough research material available

What we now know about sleep and sleep disorders—more focused

**2. Support**. Your subject must be treated in written sources that are available to you. Also, remember that your sources must be treated objectively, so that the final paper reflects what is known about a subject, rather than just what you believe to be true about a subject.

You can find support for your arguments by conducting a search of Internet resources. Remember, though, that the Internet, as an unregulated source of information, does not always provide you with the landmark studies in a particular field.

**3. Significance.** Find something that you want to explore and that needs exploration.

**Doing Research on the Internet**

The sheer convenience of the World Wide Web makes it a desirable research tool. It is often more up-to-date than printed sources, and is able to combine many different media. It also has a broad range, including popular items as well as scholarly ones. There are, of course, disadvantages to the Internet as well. For one thin, materials are fluid there; they may change without warning or disappear altogether, or they may look different on different browsers. Because they allow anyone to publish, without the intervention of gatekeepers such as publishers, they are more democratic and broader in their range. Everyone from expert to amateur may be on the Web, so be aware that many resources are not in any way subject to peer review to set standards for the work that is produced. This, of course, means that it is up to you to decide how you evaluate the materials that you encounter on the Web.

**Evaluating Web Sources**

Here are some questions you might ask of a site you are considering as a source for your research:

 Who is the author? How well know is he or she?

 Does the site or the author have a professional or academic connection?

 Is the site sponsored by an academic institution?

 Is the site objective, or does it have an obvious bias?

 Is the site well designed?

 Is the site updated?

 Have articles on the Web been peer reviewed?

**Drawing up an outline**

An outline for a research essay takes its direction from your preparatory reading.

 Your outline must be flexible enough to accommodate all the information pertinent to your thesis statement.

 Your outline must be fair and must reflect an objective approach to the material.

 Your outline must be firmly established in your mind so that it does not attempt to include more material than can be adequately handled within the limits of the assignment.

 Your outline is designed to be used. In the case of a research essay, the outline dictates the direction of your note-taking. It should help you stay on track in your explorations and help you limit yourself to what is possible.

Below is the first two pages of a sample research essay. Note the style which is used to acknowledge the sources. This is MLA (Modern Language Association) style, which is the style most commonly used in the humanities. In next week’s notes, I will give you some instruction in MLA citation and bibliography format, as well as in putting research material into your own words (paraphrasing and summarizing).

**SAMPLE RESEARCH PAPER**

**Connecticut Yankee at King Arthur's Court**

The late nineteenth century in the United States saw the peak of the buzz and commotion that is presently known as the Industrial Revolution. Caught deep within the gears of this mechanized movement, both socially and financially, was one Samuel Langhorne Clemens, best known as Mark Twain. Twain's ideas on industrialization were based on practical experience, due in part to heavy investment in, and loss from, a newly developed type-setting machine as well as an acute interest in the universal ramifications of such modernization (Kaplan 12). It is amid such an economically turbulent and technologically elevated era that Twain conceived, wrote, and published the critically complex A Connecticut Yankee at King Arthur's Court. Twain's vision of sixth century England as seen through the eyes of "Yankee" Hank Morgan is the setting for biting social commentary on what was occurring throughout the States, especially in his home region of the Northeast. Technology was not the only area experiencing rapid growth, but new political and economic theories abounded and Twain was aloof to these changes. A Connecticut Yankee attacks specifically three institutions which Twain had dealt with and experienced first hand: capitalism, slavery, and organized religion. Critical analysis of Twain's piece, given a Marxist slant, dissects each of those institutions addressed and examines what are, perhaps, the "covert" intentions of the author and the social and political environments that spawned such ideology (Barry 167). Beyond the deliberate, surface level criticism of such ideas, Twain intertwines the fantastic foreground of a fictional tale with much of his own personal belief masked by the brilliant and brutal society artificially crafted by the protagonist and political mouthpiece, Hank Morgan.

The setting of A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court, sixth-century England, is not one naturally conducive to the economic and political products of capitalistic rule. However, as Henry Nash Smith states in his Fable of Progress, "this medieval setting is obviously not meant to represent any actual place or time. It's a backdrop designed to allow a nineteenth-century American industrial genius to show what he can do with an underdeveloped country" (36). With a neutral setting established and a familiar plot based on Sir Thomas Malory's legendary Morte d'Arthur, Twain creates an idyllic arena for his exploration of the effects of capitalism on a relatively "primitive" society. Once Hank adjusts to his new surroundings, he sets at once to develop a new democratic, capitalistic republic, so that he might "boss the whole country inside of three months" (Twain 50). Twain was intimately acquainted with the ins and outs of capitalism. He had experienced an admirable standard of living due to his writing, but knew poverty as a child and bankruptcy with the aforementioned failed investment later in life. With this in mind, Twain uses Hank and his financial prowess to exemplify both the advantages and ills of a free-trade economy. This "doctrinaire didacticism" (Baldanza 118) is manifest in Hank's theoretic and specific explanations of "income versus cost of living" to the local working class, which efforts are proven futile. In Fulton's Ethical Realism, he adroitly addresses this scene: "For all his nineteenth-century intelligence, Hank spoils the banquet that would celebrate the ultimate truth about labor and wages: the right to enjoy the fruits of one's labor" (104). Also found in the same aptly titled Chapter 33, "Sixth-Century Political Economy," are hints of Twain delving into almost purely socialistic ideas with the description of modern labor unions and a debate over minimum-wage. The detailed and explicit style of this chapter could well be Twain's personal "manifesto" on such issues.

Twain sneaks enterprising ideals into A Connecticut Yankee from beginning of the book. This is exemplified, as Richard Slotkin states in Mark Twain's Frontier, Hank Morgan's Last Stand, by Hank's insistence on the knight's adopting advertising banners for hygienic items aimed a general populous which neither reads nor uses the products (121). Slotkin sees the political agenda of Twain as "meant to contrast the progressive spirit of nineteenth-century American values with the regressive ideologies of traditional aristocracy, political monarchism, and established religion" (121). Even such ironies as a newspaper to an essentially illiterate population sprout from Hank's dually fueled fire of socialistic well-meaning and capitalistic greed. The eventual self-destruction of what has come to be an ideal political state is comes from this dueling sense of duty. When Hank destroys the factories and, in a sense, civilization, he does so in an effort to save what is left of the country from what were originally created for its well being. David R. Sewell suggests Hank as either a "progressive hero [. . .] sabotaged by reactionary forces" or "an authoritarian, proto-fascist," both connote his total influence on that era due mainly to his radically reformative capitalistic ideologies (Sewell 142).

It is no mystery how Twain's life, especially his childhood along the Mississippi River, evolved and revolved around the issue of slavery. Critics have long debated the ambiguity of Twain's classic Huckleberry Finn and A Connecticut Yankee offers similar room for debate. Twain devotes four chapters to the enslavement and eventual freedom of Hank and a disguised King Arthur. "Slaves! The word had a new sound - and how unspeakably awful!" cries Hank upon the decree that both he and the king are to become the property of someone else (319). The ensuing pages relate the horrors the pair face as stories and ideas of slavery "take a meaning, get to be very vivid, when you come to apply them to yourself" (319). Once Hank has been subjected to the inhumane existence of a slave he demands that the king abolish slavery upon their rescue. This comes as an open renunciation of slavery, especially for those who have witnessed the atrocities that accompany it firsthand, yet also hints toward in ignorance-based excuse for proponents of slavery. Twain's personal experience growing up in the South no doubt molded his conception of the evils of slavery, yet also afforded him the ability to honestly and objectively look at the issue from the other side, without coming to agree with it. Perhaps, in a Marxist perspective, Twain's continual use of slavery as an issue in his works, throughout A Connecticut Yankee and beyond, represents his inner-struggle with the issue himself. "He seemed to think that both the human situation and the humans who could do nothing about it left nearly everything to be desired" (Schmitter 7).

Of all the issues touched upon in this paper, none is as blatantly attacked as the age-old scapegoat, organized religion. Hank Morgan, from the beginning, openly decries the "concentrated power" and "political machine" that Catholic Church (160) and later his "project" to "overthrow the Catholic Church and set up the Protestant faith on its ruins--not as an Established Church" (365). "I was afraid of a united Church; it makes a mighty power, the mightiest conceivable, and then when it by-and-by gets into selfish hands, as it is always bound to do, it means death to human liberty, and paralysis to human thought" (102). Twain was not tinkering with novel ideas behind the mask of Morgan. It is well documented that he was opposed to powerful, organized religion and such a quote could have as easily been taken from his personal notes. In fact, Smith writes, "A reviewer of A Connecticut Yankee for the Edinburgh Scots Observer called the book a Îlecture' in dispraise of monarchial institutions and religious establishments as the roots of all evil" (73). Twain's attack on established religion was not all-encompassing. In fact, he gives a slightly compassionate nod toward those earnest members of religious groups, specifically some priests of that era: "Not all priests were frauds and self-seekers, but that many, even the great majority, of these that were down on the ground among the common people, were sincere and right hearted and devoted to the alleviation of human troubles and suffering" (160). Hank also speaks approvingly of a fragmented, non-denominational Protestant "go-as-you-please" style church (365). However, the overall tone is clear: The separation of church and state is essential in maintaining the freedom of the individual. Ironically, Hank's downfall is due in a big part to the scheming of the Church, the very organization he so openly opposed, and the Interdict it decrees throughout the land.

Hank Morgan's industrialization of sixth-century England can be treated as both symbolic of progress and characteristic of corruptive imperialism. Hank's determination to shift national focus from religion and superstition toward technology is either an amazing venture in capitalism or simply a repackaged, fiscally sound "opiate of the masses." Mark Twain's roots in the South show through as he jabs at all things aristocratically established, from religion to slavery. In a sense, "A Connecticut Yankee could be taken as the expression of an international crusade for democracy," with a support for both industrialization and free enterprise (Smith 76). However, Twain's personal experiences give away the cautionary tone toward such a generalization of his outlook towards humanity, which, if A Connecticut Yankee serves as an archetype for the human race, appears dismally accurate.

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