

Sample Writing Assignments Across the Curriculum

General

1. Describe a tradition with which you are acquainted, whether a national, ethnic, family or personal. As part of your description you should discuss what significance the tradition supposedly has. A good paper would also consider whether the tradition retains any significance, or has become merely hollow ritual, and why. (You may, of course, include your own reasons for accepting or rejecting this tradition.) Focus your attention on only one tradition for this paper.
2. Review a book not on the reading list that treats the material of the course.
3. Speculate on an unsolved problem in biology and discuss the relevant research.

American Civilization

The European historian Natalie Zemos Davis advised scholars to study “the history of both women and men,” not only that of the subjected sex. “Our goal,” she wrote, “is to understand the significance of the sexes, of gender groups in the historical past. Our goal is to discover the range in sex roles and in sexual symbolism in different societies and periods, to find out what meaning they had and how they functioned to maintain the social order or to promote its change.” As her late colleague Jean Kelly affirmed, “the idea of the social relation of the sexes” is the core of the New Scholarship.

With the insightful comments of Davis and Kelly in mind, evaluate the historical scholarship on the period since World War II and sketch your own framework of analysis, however fragmentary at this point.

Archaeology

Using examples from your class notes and readings: In a two page typewritten, proofread paper, discuss the various features which characterize Elba (Tell Mardikh II B1 and II B2, 2400-2250 B.C.) as an urban society.

Art History

1. Assess the influence of Paul Cezanne on the cubist movement with reference to his 1906 canvas, “Au Bord de la Riviere.”
2. At the RISD Museum, you will find a painting by Joachim Wttewael entitled Marriage of Peleus and Thetis and a painting by Nicholas Poussin entitled Venus and Adonis. Both paintings were painted after 1600. One by a northern painter, the other by a painter trained and resident in Rome. Given the paintings you’ve seen in class, what are the stylistic sources common to each and what are the peculiarities. (5 pages)

Biology

Write a lab write-up on the plant lab.

Business and Management

Assume you are a consultant to the manager of a company and give your suggestions for what the company should do in the future. In your first paragraph overview the report.

Classics

1. Was Achilles right?
 1. in quarreling with Agamemnon?
 2. in withdrawing from the army?

3. in having Thetis intercede with Zeus?
4. in refusing the overtures made to him in Book IX?
5. in returning to battle to Book XIX?

In your paper you should describe the events, and consider the arguments used by Achilles and others. Do you feel that in terms of the epic itself a) Achilles deserved what he got, and b) that he should (or should not) – morally – have returned to the Greek army as a result of the overtones made to him by Agamemnon, Odysseus, Phoenix, Ajax (Book IX)? Opinions differ on this question, and I am interested in your views and arguments?

2. Was Achilles wrong to refuse the overtures made to him in Book X of the Iliad? Should he have returned to battle?

Education

“Today more civic loyalty centers around basketball than any other one thing.” (Middletown, p. 485). Friday night games provided something for Middletowners; it carried meaning, as a ritual. Identify and describe some analogous “ritual” – whether “formal” (like basketball games) or “informal” (like a regular happening that some particular group of students create) – in your own high school experience and analyze what ends were thus served and why those ends were important.

English and American Literature

1. Write a 6 to 8 page paper on Shelley’s “Hymn to Intellectual Beauty.” What makes the poem Romantic?
2. Analyze the language in Jonathan Swift’s Gulliver’s Travels. Consider: the language as spoken by the various people met by Gulliver; Gulliver’s reaction to that language; and what Swift is ultimately trying to say with this language.
3. Discuss one significant way in which the vision of erotic liberation presented in *The Color Purple* challenges your own view of erotic freedom.
Why is this challenge a significant one in your view?
4. The second paper will deal with the frontier in the 20th century American fiction. You will be expected to discuss the values which one or more writers have found in the frontier, and how they have tried to recreate those values in their fictive worlds. This should lead you to consider the meaning and value of their work to contemporary American life.

Alternatively, some students may wish to speculate on the literary future of the frontier. Will the frontier and those values associated with it continue to occupy a central place in the American imagination? If so, where will American writers turn, in the last half of the 20th century, to rediscover or recreate those values?

Environmental Studies

Present arguments that there is a connection between individual food consumption and global hunger and arguments that there is not.

How do you resolve these conflicting views, and does your resolution lead you to take action?

History

1. Did Peter the Great truly deserve his epithet “the Great”?

2. “It is typical to see Machiavelli and More as polar opposites – the tough-minded realist versus the naïve idealist. In this view, Machiavelli is the disabused power politician who knows that the ruler must take men as they are and do whatever is necessary to rule them, More is the high-minded dreamer who concocts ideal commonwealths that might be put into practice if only men were different from what they are. This commonplace view could not be more wrong: in fact, it was More who was the greater realist of the two. Both men were idealists in the sense that they both held to a set of ideals which they cherished. The chief difference between them was that Machiavelli unrealistically thought that his political ideals might be put into practice, while More was too clear-sighted to dream that his could.”

Disagree or agree with this quote, and state why, based on the readings of The Prince, The Discourses, and Utopia.

3. Read the articles concerning social problems in Perspectives from the Soviet Press. Write a 10-page paper assessing the manner in which the press depicts these problems and what solutions it offers. Does the press propagandize the virtues of the system? What sorts of solutions to problems, or proposals for change are commonly made? What do you think are the central purposes or functions of this state-controlled press?

Literature and Society

Write a 6 to 8 page double-spaced typewritten essay discussing aspects of the interaction of the class mentalities, positions and practices of the middle class and the upper class, represented in Laclos' Les liaisons dangereuses. Consider how class position may determine formations of behavior in the novel, such as strategies of resistance, escape or transcendence of social position, or patterns of using other people. Analyze the ways in which class and class conflicts are registered in the text of the novel, in terms of relationships, plot formations, images derived from actions, codes, tropes, characterization, and/or actions. Your discussion should be informed by the background lectures, historical readings, and, particularly, the Rousseau and Darnton material. Support your discussion with examples from the text of the novel (footnotes unnecessary). Remember: we are looking for your thinking, your brilliance; you are made unlike anyone you have ever met; I will even venture to say that you are like no one in the world.

Philosophy

Critically discuss two different arguments – one from Plato and one from the Upanishads – to show that the Soul is not identical with the body. Which of them do you find more convincing and why?

Political Science

1. I will arrange for you to get a newspaper subscription at a reduced rate. Pick an issue. Describe and analyze it using your (by now, extensive) expertise in American city politics.
2. Drawing upon your knowledge of social conflict and the materials covered in the course only thorough session 7, analyze the events described above. In the course of your analysis, show how socialization and the distribution of values and beliefs affected the outcome of the conflict. You are to analyze the case material as presented; no additional research is required! Also treat the situation objectively and don't inject your own values into the analysis! The assignment should be machine-produced, double-spaced and should not exceed 6 pages. Each page should not exceed 250 words.

Religious Studies

1. What different conceptions of self and world underlie the notions of moksa and nirvana?

2. Choose six authors whose works we have read. Assess the degree to which each is attentive to the “native model.” Are there systematic differences between the anthropologists and the historians of religion in this regard.
3. Explain the Early Buddhist understanding of the nature of the world as round in the Sutta-pitaka of the Pali Canon (Theravada School). In order to organize your answer I suggest the following headings. You may however choose your own method of organization if you wish.
 - a. The Four Holy Truths
 - b. Conditioned Origination
 - c. The Human Personality
 - d. Cognition and the mis-perception of the world.

Use as many of the following ideas as you can:

1. Suffering (dukkha)
 2. Ignorance
 3. Craving (tanha)
 4. Grasping (upadana)
 5. Karma and Samsara
 6. The 5 skandhas
 7. The 3 marks
 8. The 12 sense fields
 9. The 3 afflictions (Klesa)
 10. The 3 binding influences
 11. The 3 inverted views
4. How optimistic can we afford to be about the possibility of human transformation? Work out a position on this question with reference to at least two of the authors.

Sociology

1. Two college students are on a first date. Analyze this situation comprehensively but concisely from a social-psychological perspective. Be sure to define your terms. A thorough analysis will balance and synthesize insights gained from both the readings and the lectures.
2. In reference to the formation of racial political groups, critically analyze the explanations offered by two of the following approaches: Rational Choice Theory, Psychological Development Theory, the Community Model, and Marxist Theory. To analyze is to do more than summarize each position: provide strengths and weaknesses to each approach to explanation. Address the mode of argumentation used. How does the author (approach) know what he or she claims to know?