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Strategies for Writing a Successful Paper

Strategies for the successful paper

The following are some general strategies for producing a successful literature paper. These ideas elaborate on the expectations for papers presented in the grading criteria included with your syllabus.

Strategy 1. **Discuss your topic, thesis, ideas with the professor.**

I hate to be so rudimentary, but I cannot emphasize enough the benefit of discussing your ideas before you go to all the work of writing. Ideally you would submit a draft in advance so that you could benefit from detailed notes and suggestions for revision. However, if that is not possible, take the time to drop by my office hours to discuss your thoughts.

When you get an introduction and/or thesis worked out, take the time to discuss that with me as well. However, you need to recognize that a thesis often changes as the paper is written and may need to be adjusted accordingly.

Strategy 2. **Develop a workable thesis that informs your paper.**

There are a number of issues to be addressed when it comes to discussing a thesis. A thesis is not simply the result of turning questions from the topic into an assertion--though this can be a good starting point. A good thesis is a clear argument, an assertion that addresses *all* of the issues that will be covered in your paper.

Way too often, a paper will begin arguing one idea and conclude by arguing a number of others. Take the time to make sure that your thesis actually aligns with the argument that follows. **Read your concluding sections, and then go back and read your introduction to see how well they coincide.** If it appears that your argument has significantly changed in the course of the paper, you will need to revise the first part(s) of your paper accordingly.

The thesis should really inform your paper. It can often help to determine broad aspects of your structure. It should be a guiding force in making transitions between central elements in your body. Make sure that you are connecting each section of the paper both to the preceding and following sections and to your overall argument. While you need not continually repeat your thesis, you do need to show how each section further supports the argument you are making. By "section," I mean paragraph or group of paragraphs discussing a similar idea.

Strategy 3. **Do not assume knowledge.**

While you do want to recognize the likely intelligence of your reader and write with a vocabulary, tone and style that acknowledge this intelligence, do not assume that your reader knows what you do. Two people can read the same passage and not interpret it in the same way. Do not assume that your reader will automatically understand ideas, textual passages or interpretations, even if these seem self-evident to you. Take the time to explain why an idea is valid, what a textual passage means, or how your interpretation is supported by the evidence.

Strategy 4. Provide sufficient evidence, especially from the text(s) in question.

I cannot stress this enough. Offer detailed examples from the text(s) in question to support the interpretations you are making about the story, poem, or novel.

- Do not merely describe what occurs; instead, use the text to substantiate your reading of it.
- Do not merely provide a passage of text and leave its meaning as self-evident. Instead, comment on exactly how the passage illustrates your point.
- Try to avoid the use of long block quotations. Shorter excerpts are easier to discuss. Break down Block passages into sections and comment on each.
- Do not assume that one example is enough to convince your reader of your interpretation. Very often one example is not enough.
- Document everything. Provide page numbers and offer a works cited even for primary texts.

Strategy 5. Aim for depth over breadth.

Many students feel as if they have to cover every aspect of a topic. A good introduction and working thesis structure, for your reader, the parameters of your argument. If you set forth a thesis that does not cover every aspect of the proposed topic, and you take the time to prove that thesis in sufficient detail, you are not likely to be challenged for having failed to address all aspects of the topic. On the other hand, if your introduction and thesis are not specific, if they in fact suggest that you will be covering many aspects of the topic, then you are telling your reader that you will cover *all* of these areas in some depth. Use the introduction and thesis as a means of focussing your discussion. Then use the analysis you present in the body as a means of expanding that analysis within the limitations established by your focussed thesis.

Bear in mind, however, that your argument can indicate areas you *need* to address in order to substantiate your argument. Don't let your focus prevent you from addressing what is necessary to prove your argument as effectively as possible. Page limit is a factor, here. Realistically you cannot cover every aspect of naturalism in The Awakening in a 5 page paper. You can, however, focus on a set of naturalistic characteristics--that set being determined by what you want to argue about the novel. Once again, coming to discuss your ideas with me is a good way of getting advice on how to focus.

Strategy 6. Never wait until the last minute to write the paper.

No one can have a successful college career waiting until the last minute to write his/her papers. You might pull off a decent grade now and then, but as a practice, this is not wise. Time and work make for good papers. Finish the paper with enough time to let it sit a day before you submit it. This will allow you a distanced perspective. You will at least be more prepared to notice technical errors. You will likely even notice problems of logic or unclear sections that you will still have time to fix.

Have someone you trust read over your paper. Avoid boy/girlfriend's who might have ulterior motives for saying your work is wonderful.

Strategy 7. Use the "point by point" method for comparative analyses.

Some people like to use the "block" method when writing a comparative analysis. By "block method" I mean a paper that examines one text completely before moving on to the second text. The problem with this method is that you force yourself and your reader to look back and/or forward from one analysis to the next whenever you make a comparison. The "point by point" method structures the analysis in terms of the points to be compared. It keeps your analysis focussed and keeps your reader right with you.

Strategy 8. In comparative analyses, do not simply point out similarities or differences.

If you simply list similarities and differences between these texts, you likely have no thesis. The topic generally implies that there are similarities and differences, so pointing them out, even in detail, is not sufficient. What is important for the analysis is what you see as the significance derived from comparing these aspects.

Strategy 9. Think of your paper as an opportunity to show what *you* think and know.

Way too often, students think of papers as chores. While this is understandable to a degree, if that attitude informs your essay, it often leads to less than adequate work. Your paper is the opportunity for you to wrestle with your ideas, the platform for you to make your contribution to longstanding discussions about the works in question, and the chance for you to demonstrate and hone your critical thinking skills. It may sound strange, but writing a paper should be an enjoyable experience.



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