

In-class Essay General Instructions

Please choose from one of the following prompts and then compose an essay that

- focuses on your academic seminar book (of course)
- addresses the prompt and...
- ...establishes a complex, original claim about one of your book's themes.
- supports your claim with wide-ranging textual evidence that includes some analysis of literary elements and devices.
- quotes directly from the text as well as from at least **one secondary source**.
- anticipates and acknowledges counterarguments.

Sample Prompts

Below are two sample prompts, followed by some thoughts about how to use the prompts to develop your own analysis.

SAMPLE PROMPT #1

"I have great respect for the past. If you don't know where you've come from, you don't know where you're going." - Maya Angelou

The Past. How does the novel or short story collection you read conceive of the past and its role in the characters' present and future? Feel free to use the Angelou quotation as a jumping off point.

Advice for a prompt like this: This prompt gives you a main **subject** for your essay: the past. What it does not give you is a **theme**. For that you need to ask yourself the following question: **What does the novel/short story/author have to say about the past?**

For example (for this handout I've used books from earlier in the year), here's what a complex claim about *The Great Gatsby* might look like for this prompt:

For a novel set in the progressive "future-obsessed" Jazz Age, *The Great Gatsby* shows how characters, specifically Jay Gatsby and the narrator, Nick, become stuck in the past, romanticizing earlier versions of themselves to distract from the emptiness of their current lives.

It is also worth noting that this style of prompt does not provide any specific **literary elements or devices** on which to focus, so you'll want to keep that in mind as you figure out what to write about. For the claim above, I could definitely focus on the retrospective quality of Nick's narrative perspective and could also look at how the clock is used symbolically in the scene in which Daisy comes to Gatsby's house.

SAMPLE PROMPT #2

“Places are never just places in a piece of writing. If they are, the author has failed. Setting is not inert. It is activated by point of view.” — Carmen Maria Machado, *In the Dream House*

Explore how the setting is active in the novel or short story collection you read. What role(s) does it play in constructing a central theme in the work?

Advice for a prompt like this:

This prompt gives you a different piece of the puzzle than the first one: a clear **literary element** to analyze. However it does not give you a **subject/theme** to work with.

Here’s an example of what a complex claim might look like for *Their Eyes Were Watching God*:

In *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Hurston establishes a clear contrast between two primary settings, the town of Eatonville and the part of the Everglades the characters call the Muck. These settings represent two different ways of living, one cosmopolitan and “progressive” and the other pastoral and focused on “fun and foolishness” (176). Hurston subverts many of the ideals of the Harlem Renaissance by having Janie find more meaning and pleasure in the latter than the former, but Hurston also complicates this realization in the novel’s resolution where she implies that a fully actualized character creates an internal landscape that is more important than any external setting.

OTHER ADVICE

You may find it helpful to gather quotations prior to the in-class essay, such as...

- Phrases that could be useful for exposition (summary). If you know, for example, that there is a particular character/scene/setting you will most likely write about, you can collect some of the evocative phrases or words from the book to use when giving background. Take a look at the two example sentences below and you’ll see what a difference this can make!

Plain old exposition (summary) introducing a character to be analyzed.	Ethos-building exposition using a few well-selected quick quotes.
Leonce Pontellier is a businessman in New Orleans and he is well-respected. Everyone sees him as a good father and husband.	Leonce Pontellier, a 40-year old businessman, with a “neatly and closely trimmed beard,” is a “favorite” on Grand Isle and even “declared the best husband in the world” at one point early in the novel (3, 14). (Note: you do not need to include page numbers in the essay unless they are easily accessible).

- If you think you may work with a motif (series of repeated/echoed details), you can google a pdf version of your book and complete a command+F search. As a bonus, this often leads to surprising discoveries. (For example, when I command+F searched for “cars” and “automobiles” in *Gatsby*, I found that the first mention of cars is actually when Nick makes an ironic comment to Daisy that everyone in Chicago painted their wheels “black” out of sadness for the fact that she moved out East, suggesting the centrality of cars in the cultural lives of Americans!)
- **Collect Phrases / Ideas / Full sentences from secondary sources** that are particularly relevant and interesting.
 - For example, in the essay Billy read on *The Things They Carried*, it discusses how soldiers experience “moral disorientation” when they go to war and when they return home. That phrase is a brilliant way of describing the situation of some of the soldiers and could be useful in how I might summarize the book when writing about it: O’Brien’s story cycle includes a number of stories about male soldiers experiencing “moral disorientation” as they transition from the brutality of the war in Vietnam back to an American society that seems deaf and blind to what they have experienced (Bonney).
 - You may also find yourself working with bigger claims made by a source about an important theme in the text. Notice in the example below how the source’s ideas are used to help with the claim in the introduction but also as support within a body paragraph.

Introduction based on the the Sample Prompt #2:

Carmen Marchado argues that in great literature settings are not “inert” but play an “active” role in developing larger themes. This is definitely the case in Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Two of the major settings in the novel, the town of Eatonville and the Everglades community called the Muck, come to represent divergent pathways for the protagonist, Janie, and for black life. Hurston subverts the ideals of the Harlem Renaissance by having Janie reject the “progress” of Eatonville in favor of the “fun and foolishness” of the Muck, but complicates that choice further by having her return to Eatonville. **As critic Ryan Simmons suggests the novel “represents a troubled search for a ‘third way,’ a method for breaking out from the accommodating and replicating patterns” of the past.** Hurston uses contrast between the settings and powerful metaphors in the book’s resolution to show how Janie is able to achieve a “third way” in which her identity can be built out of traditional black rural and cosmopolitan lives.

[...] The transformation of Eatonville, from a place that Janie first sees as a “whole heap littler than Ah thought” to a fully built-up black-owned town, seems like a powerful symbol of success. However, the novel subtly questions

what has been gained and lost by Joe Starks ripping up “all these stumps and roots” and replacing them with big houses and lamp posts. **Simmons suggests that Joe Starks represents a particular kind of problem: “In subscribing to traditional Anglo-American authority patterns, African Americans risk replicating the very means of their oppression, Hurston perceived.”** A great example of this “risk” can be seen in the way the townfolks think about the new setting being constructed by Joe Starks: “Take for instance that new house of his. It had two stories with porches, with bannisters and such things. The rest of the town looked like servants’ quarters surrounding the ‘big house.’” The fact that Starks has modeled his new town on the architecture of the slave plantation is troubling and mirrors the way he builds hierarchy into the structure of his marriage with Janie. In order for him to be a “big voice,” she must appear small [...]

- Review the precise literary terminology you will likely use in relation to your book. For example, Tim O'Brien's “book” could be labeled as a “semi-autobiographical novel,” but it is probably more precise to call it a “fictional short story cycle inspired by events in O'Brien's life.” You can review this [great literary terminology handout](#) and the equally awesome lit crit resources (in google classroom) from Ms.Stern and select out a few of the terms/concepts you feel confident you might use.
- Review the “practitioner” column of the rubric below, which lays out some of the goals of this type of writing.
- In terms of structuring your in-class essay, based on the time constraints, I would shoot for four to five paragraphs with....
 - A brief intro. that addresses the prompt and ends with a guiding claim statement (thesis) that ideally has two or three “parts,” which can be used to set up your paragraphs (see example below)
 - 2-3 body paragraphs that are used to develop your claim.
 - A conclusion (if you have time) that restates claim and “zooms out” by putting the book in a larger cultural or literary context (maybe even comparing to other works you have read) or “pans across,” exploring how your thesis relates to some other key aspect of the book.

Example outline based on the claim above:

CLAIM: For a novel set in the progressive Jazz era, *The Great Gatsby* shows how characters, specifically Jay Gatsby (1) and the narrator, Nick (2), have become mired in the past, romanticizing earlier versions of themselves to distract from the emptiness of their current lives.

Intro

- Angelou quote
- Paraphrase (in other words)
- 1 sentence about Gatsby American Dream (future-focused)
- Claim

Body #1 (GATSBY)

- Gatsby appears to represent future but turns out to be obsessed with the past--developed through story arc and symbolism.
- Gatsby's "green light" **symbol** of the future, but....
- Gatsby obsessed with litigating the past
 - Clock scene
 - Horrible scene in the hotel where he tries to force Daisy to rewrite the past
 - Comparison of boat metaphor (progress) vs actual death (floaty in pool)

Body #2 (NICK) seems like a secondary character but is very important as Gatsby's story is a projection of his own, and his story is all about going backwards, symbolically about the past.

- Retrospective narrative perspective--Nick is still thinking about/worrying about events of the past year.
- Return to the West in the resolution
- Nick comes out East in the first place to avoid dealing with potential engagement (running from the past)
- War service (not mentioned often) but seems to haunt the book

Conclusion

- Fitzgerald sets story in the past (novel written in 1937)
- America today, wrestling with the past -- reparations debate. Honor, Ignore, understand the past.

	A Novice...	A Developing Learner...	A Practitioner...	An Expert / Specialist...
Ideas / Interpretations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * offers a summary of the work as a whole and/or personal response to the work. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * offers clear observations about specific details or features of the work and/or summarizes the work in some detail. * Offers clear idea/interpretation of the specific details or features. * Offers an idea about the work's overall projects 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * addresses the prompt directly * offers a clear, complex idea/interpretation of specific details or features of the work (poem, painting, book, etc.) * offers an interesting idea(s) about the overall "projects" or themes of the work. * explains how the individual details inform and help create the overall project. * Tries out competing theories to arrive at the best possible claim. (theory of parsimony) 	<p>does all of practitioner plus...</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> * compares and contrasts ideas/interpretations with other claims made about the work. * makes an argument as to why the claim matters in larger contexts. * is original--takes a different approach from others' work with the text.
Support / Evidence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * offers personal opinion as a support for ideas. * offers summary of parts of the work as support. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * offers a few pieces of support and generalizations of outside knowledge that the audience might not understand or disagree with. * makes fleeting references to other details in the work. * summarizes key details from the work. * quotes directly from the original work. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * accounts for a wide range of evidence from the work, outside knowledge, and/or research in the most elegant way. * acknowledges and deals with potential counterarguments and questions. * includes healthy exploration of both big, obvious details (e.g. title), and smaller, seemingly insignificant details. * connects multiple pieces of evidence in support of the idea. * quotes directly from the original work as well as paraphrasing. Takes the "right" amount of the original subject in its quoting and integrates quotations efficiently. * Uses at least one secondary source. 	<p>does all of practitioner plus...</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> * connects <i>seemingly unrelated</i> pieces of evidence and brings them "into concert" with each other. * uses more than one outside source, particularly "idea-based" academic ones, to help support and complicate claims. * uses logic and analogy to build surprising pieces of original support.
Context for the audience (exposition)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * needs to fill in details orally in order for writing to make sense. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * offers some general exposition about the work. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * uses exposition so that without the work in front of it the audience will have no difficulty understanding it or the specific details being analyzed. 	<p>does all of practitioner plus...</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> * on occasion, adds "pop" to the exposition by using figurative language, imagery, surprising word choice, and/or syntax variation.

Word Choice/Voice Subject-Specific Terminology	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * uses general vocabulary and correctly employs existential verbs 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * is clear and concise * uses subject-specific terminology with some slight errors in meaning. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * is concise * favors action verbs * uses verbs and adverbs to clarify for the audience when it is discussing facts from the work and when ideas. * correctly utilizes subject-specific vocabulary, defining and clarifying terms where appropriate for a general audience. Usage indicates a clear understanding of how the particular vocabulary is used in discussing the subject. * uses and acknowledges "borrowed" language from secondary sources that is precise and ethos-rich. 	<p>does all of practitioner plus...</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> * consults with a subject-specialist or subject-journal to better understand how terminology is used. * look up and work with new terminology not covered in class. * on occasion, experiments with imagery, figurative language, and sound effects that reinforce and do not distract from the ideas.
Organization	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * uses and correctly formats paragraphs. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * includes an introduction that clearly sets up the subject of the paper. * includes a conclusion that wraps up the paper by restating the essential idea. * uses a few conjunctive adverbs and prepositional phrases to make transitions. * writes concluding sentences that wrap up essential idea. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * includes an introduction that clearly sets up the subject of the paper; establishes that you know your subject; demonstrates an understanding of your audience, which includes both academic teachers like me, your peers, and the people in your life who are thinkers you respect; grabs that audience's attention; and offers a clear focus or thesis for the paper. \ * includes a conclusion that follows from the evidence presented and has some movement (zooming out or panning over). * uses thoughtful transitions within and between paragraphs with precise, guiding topic and concluding sentences. 	<p>does all of practitioner, plus...</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> * uses parallel construction to make transitions between ideas. * knowingly breaks from conventional organizational patterns in order to emphasize an idea.
Interaction with Class Ideas	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * * offers ideas about the book, some of which would have been improved through work with notes from academic seminars. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * mentions an idea or two from academic seminars. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * uses good ideas from academic seminars of the work; adds on to those ideas by expressing them in a particularly powerful way, by offering new pieces of evidence in support of them, or by connecting them to new ideas. 	<p>does all of the practitioner, plus..</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> * deepens and complicates ideas developed through academic seminars. * quotes (and cites) what someone said in your academic seminar group: McCarthy creates a "dark irony" in his characterization of the boy (Seldenberg).