

Close Reading Essay

Religious Pluralism and the American State

Overview

What you should learn

A close reading is a careful analysis of the wording, style, and content of a text. In performing a close reading of a text, we interpret the text and draw conclusions about its significance. In writing out what we have learned from a text, we discipline ourselves to read carefully and we make our thoughts available to others. This kind of writing is an important skill used in all academic disciplines, from analyzing a novel in a literature course, to explaining a painting in an art history class, to drawing conclusions from a data set in the social or natural sciences.

By completing this assignment, you will learn to exposit a text in writing. You will also practice the mechanics and techniques of good writing you have read about in *Style: Lessons in Clarity and Grace* and in Strunk & Matzko. This essay is your chance to exposit some of the central texts in the long debate about religion and the American state.

Your sources

For our class discussions you have read a number of documents from the early years of the federal and state governments. These documents include the religion clauses from federal and state constitutions, the Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom, a letter by Benjamin Franklin, John Adams's *Defense of the Constitutions of Government of the United States of America*, James Madison's "Memorial and Remonstrance Against Religious Assessments," writings by Isaac Backus and John Leland, and the correspondence between the Newport synagogue and George Washington.

Your essay must be based on these sources. You must use at least one of them, but you may draw from as many of them as you wish. The best essay will use a few carefully selected sources which all speak to a single theme. Keep in mind that your paper will be relatively short, which means you cannot write about everything noteworthy in the sources. Instead, keep your paper focused by writing about a particular theme or problem. You need not do any additional research for this essay.

The assignment

Analyze the ideas of one or more of the primary sources we have read for class. Explain the ideas about religious freedom or pluralism that the authors hold. What problems (social, religious, political) are the authors trying to solve with those ideas? What challenges do the authors expect to their ideas? How do these ideas fit into the broader currents of American ideas we've read about and discussed in class?

Your writing process

For this essay you will complete three steps. You will first annotate a text, then develop a thesis, then write the essay. After receiving a critique of your first draft, you will revise it into a final draft. You will also do some meta-writing (writing about your writing). The details of each part of the assignment are below.

Pre-draft 1: Annotating a text

Due: XXXXXX

To *annotate* a text is to add notes, definitions, and references which help a reader understand the text. The purpose of this pre-draft assignment is to help you understand the text by formally explaining it.

Select any one of the texts for this assignment. Please send me an e-mail notifying me of your choice by XXXXXX. You will need a paper copy of this text, on which you will write keys to your annotations. (I will show you a model in class.)

Annotate this text on the basis of your critical reading, by following these steps:

1. Read the text through once to get a sense of its contents.

2. Look up a minimum of twelve words in the *Oxford English Dictionary*. Copy and paste only the relevant parts of the definitions, keyed to the location of the word in the text.
3. Identify three sentences that sum up the key meaning of the text. Identify three sources of support that the author uses.
4. In a short paragraph, summarize the author's view of religious freedom and the state.
5. In a short paragraph, describe the main supports that the author uses for the argument.
6. In a short paragraph, explain how the text's ideas of religious freedom connect to other texts we have read for this course.

Turn in your copy of the text along with your annotations.

Pre-draft 2: Drafting a thesis

Due: XXXXXX

After reading the texts for this assignment and annotating one of them, you should have a vague idea about which texts you want to write about and what you want to say about them. But you won't really know what you think until you try to write it out. This assignment is intended help you think by writing. Please do the following steps, though you may alter the order if you wish.

1. Write three to six sentences, each explaining one of your main expository insights into the texts. Arrange the sentences you have written in roughly the order they might fall in the essay.
2. Write one sentence expressing your main argument about the texts. This sentence should be your thesis. (You can revise it later.)
3. Draft an introductory paragraph, which should end with the thesis you have already written.

Turn in a PDF of your work before class, but also bring three paper copies to class. We will work on editing your pre-writing in class.

First draft

Due: XXXXXX

Your essay should follow the guidelines at the beginning of this assignment sheet. The essay should be no fewer than 5 full pages and no more than 6 pages in length.

First draft cover letter

Due: XXXXXX, stapled to the first draft of your essay (and in PDF)

After you finish writing the first draft of your paper, reread your essay and take a moment to reflect. Draft a page-long, single-spaced cover letter in paragraph form that answers the questions below. Then staple it to the top of your paper before handing it in.

1. What is the thesis of your paper? Is the thesis sentence toward the end of the first paragraph where it belongs?
2. Does the thesis make an argument? Does it go beyond stating the obvious? If not, how would you rewrite it for the final draft?
3. What kind of evidence do you use to prove your argument?
4. Do you use quotations? How many quotations do you use? Do you think this number is too few or too many? Are the quotations relevant, and do they actually help support your argument, or are they just there to fill up space?
5. Do you use argumentative topic sentences? Or do the topic sentences merely restate facts? Which topic sentences would you change and why?
6. Which paragraph are you most satisfied with and why? Be specific—don't just say it looks good.
7. Which paragraph are you least satisfied with and why? Again, be as specific as possible.
8. Are you convinced by your own argument?

Final draft

Due: XXXXXX

For the final draft, you should revise your first draft thoroughly. Take into account the comments I have given you on previous drafts, as well as your classmate's suggestions and the principles of writing we have covered in class. I will evaluate your work not just on the quality of the final draft, but on the quality of your revisions.

Final draft cover letter

After you finish writing the final draft of your paper, reread your essay and take a moment to reflect. Draft a page-long, single-spaced cover letter in paragraph form that answers the questions below. Then staple it to the top of your paper before handing it in.

1. Is your thesis in the final draft different from your thesis in the first draft? If so, how is it different? Why did you change it?
2. What are the three most significant changes you made in the final draft? Why did you make them? Were they successful?
3. How did you use the writing skills that you learned in the pre-draft exercises?
4. What did you gain most from the peer review letters and exercises? Be very specific and explain what about their advice was helpful.
5. Did your classmates recommend any changes during the peer review that you decided not to make in the final draft? If so, why did you keep things the same?
6. If you were to make any changes to this final draft, what would they be? Why would you make these changes, and why didn't you make them before handing the paper in?
7. Do you have any other thoughts about either your writing process or your final draft?

Peer review letters

Due: XXXXXX

When writing a peer review letter, you want to make your comments as specific as possible so as to be of concrete help to the author when she or he revises the essay. Keep in mind that your classmate put in a lot of hard work and energy into writing her or his essay, so always remember to be courteous, respectful, and supportive.

Draft a page-long, single-spaced cover letter in paragraph form that answers the questions below. Bring two paper copies to class, one for your classmate and one for me. Also turn in a PDF copy.

1. What is the author's thesis? Rewrite the author's thesis sentence here, and then paraphrase it in your own words so that the author can compare his or her intentions with what you actually understood. Is the thesis sentence toward the end of the first paragraph where it belongs? If you cannot find the thesis sentence, take your best guess as to what the author is trying to argue.
2. Does the thesis make an argument? Does it go beyond stating the obvious? If not, how and why would you recommend improving it?
3. What kind of evidence does the author use to prove his or her argument? Be specific.
4. Does the author use quotations? Does he or she use too many or too few quotations? Are the quotations relevant, and do they actually help support the author's argument? Or are they just there to fill up space?
5. Do the paragraphs in the essay flow in a logical fashion? Are they in order? Might there be a better arrangement? If so, how would you recommend reordering the essay?
6. Does the reader use argumentative topic sentences? Or do the topic sentences merely restate facts?
7. Was there plenty of analysis and explanation? Or did the essay seem to restate facts and simply paraphrase the treaty? If so, how could more analysis be added to make the paper more argumentative?
8. What do you really like about this essay and why? Be specific.

9. What aspect of the essay do you think requires the most revision and why? Be specific.