

WRITING PORTFOLIO

PROFESSOR JOHN HIGGINS

AIQS100

10 DECEMBER, 2023

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TREVOR SWAN

TCS94

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### Introductory Essay: Evaluating a Semester of Writing

My writing skills, throughout my life, have always been secondary to my technical and STEM-related abilities. Over the past semester, my writing skills have grown immensely, and I have become much more confident in my ability to find evidence to support complex arguments. While there have clearly been obvious improvements in my skills, I still have a ways to go and much to learn. Taking this AIQ Seminar course has developed my ability to form counter arguments, gather evidence, and provide sound arguments, though I continue to struggle with my ability to structure my essays in a logical way and write focused yet concise thesis statements.

The first essay I wrote this semester was very strong, as reflected by both my grade and comments from the professor. It was not without fault, however, as my introductory paragraph was noticeably unfocused and very minimally contributed to my argument regarding the play. I started the essay by saying, “Throughout history, Jewishness and Judaism as a whole have been treated poorly solely due to misconceptions about religion and race” (Artifact 1). This opening, while related to the essay topic, fails to contribute anything towards the essay as a whole. It should be noted that this introductory paragraph, ignoring the opening sentences, contains one of my most focused thesis statements of the semester. I clearly outline the paper and present my argument, saying, “Despite the repeated instances of Christian characters encouraging Jewish characters to convert to Christianity, *The Merchant of Venice* depicts Jewishness as a given, unalterable characteristic that is shared by all members of the Jewish community” (Artifact 1). This thesis statement uses very precise language and presents an opposing idea in the first sentence. Unfortunately, I became less proud of my thesis statements as the semester continued, which I feel was a result of the increasingly difficult topics we were tasked with discussing.

The ‘deterioration’ of my thesis statements is very clearly seen in my second essay. Around this time, I became more comfortable with writing introductory paragraphs, though that appeared to lead to my undoing, as I found myself providing more information regarding my argument before my thesis rather than being a part of it. After a brief opening to the essay, I stated, “At some moments, ideals of whiteness seem to be used as leverage points for racism in a predominantly white society. At other moments, however, it acts more as a physical characteristic, consequently highlighting characters’ insecurities” (Artifact 2). These claims could serve as the foundation for their own essay themselves, especially considering my actual thesis statement, which includes almost none of the aforementioned language. The result of this disconnect was an overall step back from my first essay, as the misled thesis statement led to a generally weaker paper. When reviewing my feedback on this essay, I am particularly struck by the comment, “... the other [interpretation] related to whiteness as a ‘leverage point,’ (something which I don’t really understand) – and don’t really explain either of these views” (Artifact 3). This comment very accurately summed up my first paragraph, as I honestly had not completely understood what I meant by ‘leverage point’ either. The professor also noted something that was very true to my essay in his closing remarks, saying, “It feels very drafty” (Artifact 4). In truth, the essay was nothing more than an edited draft, which was not something I was particularly proud of. The feedback I received on this essay served as a reality check for me, as I now realized I had a long way to go before I could comfortably write academically sound writing.

Although my previous paragraph may appear to be overly harsh towards my writing, I feel it accurately reflects my feelings towards the essays. My third essay, however, was something that I felt more confident in. I began the essay with a concise opening and presented a thesis that related very closely to the body of my essay, saying, “England’s colonialist drive in

the 17th century inspired numerous literary works that either criticized or supported colonial actions” (Artifact 5). In comparison to the first essay of the semester, clear growth can be seen. I do not jump into the meat of the essay, nor do I ramble on about unrelated topics. Instead, I succinctly provided historical context and set the stage for the following essay. This is a huge step up from the beginning of the semester, though I feel my thesis could have been much more focused.

Despite my success in the opening, my thesis statement, unfortunately, fell short in that it attempted to address so much in an essay that could only be about 1500 words long. Here, I present the idea, “Despite Prospero’s violent and manipulative tendencies, the play ultimately invites readers to feel positively towards colonialism and encourages the submission of subordinates through sympathy garnered through Prospero’s actions, coupled with the success and failure of Ariel and Caliban’s views on enslavement, respectively” (Artifact 5). Although the thesis is very clearly focused, it presents an almost impossible argument given both my capabilities and the scope of the course. This criticism was shared by the professor as well, who said, “While they both generally follow an argument that the play ‘supports colonialism,’ they do so in totally different ways” (Artifact 6). I completely agree with this statement, and it was not something I had originally considered when writing the essay. I found myself focusing significantly more on the body of my essay than the opening statement and thesis, which is well reflected in this comment. If I had adapted my thesis and made it slightly more narrow, with an emphasis on one of the two topics I had mentioned, it would have led to a much stronger essay overall.

Despite my overly ambitious thesis, my third essay highlights my ability to find and integrate supporting evidence into my writing. The second body paragraph of this essay was

clearly the strongest, relating back to the first half of my thesis statement. After presenting my first supporting quote from the text, I say, “In this scene, Prospero is clearly supporting his daughter and her engagement, and it is hard for us, as readers, to not feel inclined to identify with Prospero here. His actions incite empathy from readers, as we can see ourselves attempting to impress our child’s spouse in hopes of better welcoming them into the family” (Artifact 7). This analysis of the scene was very well written, both in my opinion and that of the professor. I accurately described the evoked feelings in the audience and related them back to the thesis statement very well. This success was continued in the latter half of the paragraph when I said, “The play is very literally asking for the audience to support Prospero and let him be free. This act, as previously mentioned, directly correlates to the audience cheering for colonialism” (Artifact 8). The success of this interpretation is due to my ability to describe the meaning of the text very logically while also relating this back to both the aforementioned ideas and the claims made previously in the essay. Feelings about this paragraph were also shared by the professor, who said, “...the second body paragraph (on how easy it is to identify with Prospero) particularly sticks out, but the rest of the essay also seems well supported” (Artifact 9). After a semester of essays that had not necessarily been praised for their inclusion of relevant and shelled-out evidence, this feedback was very meaningful to me. It emphasizes my growth as a writer, showing how far I’ve progressed when it comes to the supporting arguments I am presenting to the reader.

The success of the previous essay's body paragraph was largely a result of my attentiveness during discussions. I took notes consistently and kept track of important ideas that I could come back to for the upcoming essay. My most referenced notes regarding essay three can be seen in Artifact 10, where I took note of arguments for and against a potential question I was

hoping to pose with the essay. The scenes referenced in this article played a large role in the evidence I chose to use in the second body paragraph of my essay. It also led to a more focused question I hoped to ask for the essay. I do not feel I would've seen the success I did without the use of my in-class notes or attentiveness during discussions throughout the semester.

Despite the success of my third essay, I continued to experience trouble when it came to structuring my essay, as alluded to towards the start of this reflection. Along with my ambitious thesis statement from this essay, I failed to formulate coherent and well-supported paragraphs in the latter half of my writing. For example, I failed to introduce my fourth body paragraph in this essay with a proper transition, leaving me with a paragraph that started with, "The success found by nearly all of the characters in the play further emphasizes pro-colonialist views while also reinforcing the notion that slaves should be loyal to their masters" (Artifact 11). This, on its own, could serve as its own thesis statement, which is a large problem when trying to relate a claim back to an original idea. This observation of mine was not something I picked up on when originally writing the essay, but it is a very fair yet easy criticism to make. The lack of a transition here alludes to a larger problem in my writing that was addressed by the professor, who said, "More importantly, your argument seems to jump around a bit in the second half of the paper; you start out with an analysis of Ariel and Caliban and their attitudes towards slavery... but then switch to a paragraph on the "success" of characters in the play" (Artifact 12). The lack of connection between my main arguments in my writing takes away from the integrity of my claims while also distracting the reader from the arguments I am attempting to defend. I worked extremely hard to find good evidence for the first half of my essay, but I fell short in the latter half of my argument. The problems found in this essay very accurately describe my

shortcomings throughout the semester, and I know to focus on my structure, thesis, and claim development in a significant way in the following years.

Overall, I have seen noticeable improvements in my writing over the course of my first semester at CWRU. I, very clearly, have a lot to work on over the coming years, but I feel that this AIQ Seminar has helped me grow as a writer in a significant way. Taking into account the previously mentioned accomplishments and shortcomings of mine, I feel I have successfully identified the strengths and weaknesses of my writing and know what to prioritize in my future writing-based courses in my college career.



## LIST OF ARTIFACTS

## ARTIFACT 1: Essay one, final draft introduction

“Throughout history, Jewishness and Judaism as a whole have been treated poorly solely due to misconceptions about religion and race. From hatred in the church centuries ago to World War II’s infamous holocaust, antisemitism can be found almost anywhere in the past millennium. Shakespeare’s plays included many relevant topics for his time, making commentaries on or supporting common beliefs. One of his more common plays, *The Merchant of Venice*, displays Jewishness in an arguably controversial manner. Despite the repeated instances of Christian characters encouraging Jewish characters to convert to Christianity, *The Merchant of Venice* depicts Jewishness as a given, unalterable characteristic that is shared by all members of the Jewish community.”

## ARTIFACT 2: Essay two, final draft introduction

“Readers of *Othello* by William Shakespeare might easily disagree on the exact role whiteness plays in the play. At some moments, ideals of whiteness seem to be used as leverage points for racism in a predominantly white society. At other moments, however, it acts more as a physical characteristic, consequently highlighting characters’ insecurities. While Othello appears to act cold and barbarous towards the end of his life, his actions, those of others around him, and the tragedy that befalls him are a result of the presence of his blackness in a predominantly white society.”

ARTIFACT 3: Essay two, professor's feedback

“In the introduction, you put forward two broad possible interpretations of whiteness in the play – one related to physical characteristics, the other related to whiteness as a “leverage point,” (something which I don't really understand) – and don't really explain either of these views. As a result, you state that there's an ambiguity surrounding whiteness, but don't really show it to the reader.”

ARTIFACT 4: Essay two, professor's closing feedback

“It feels very drafty – since you still seem to be figuring out an argument as you write – but there are lots of interesting observations and some clear, complex thinking here.”

ARTIFACT 5: Essay three, introductory paragraph

“England's colonialist drive in the 17th century inspired numerous literary works that either criticized or supported colonial actions. *The Tempest*, by William Shakespeare, is an excellent example of one of these works, and a reader might easily conclude that the play is critical of colonialism in nature. This is supported by Prospero's continual mistreatment of Caliban throughout the play and his manipulation of the other natives, which might lead readers to believe that he is a villainous character. Despite Prospero's violent and manipulative tendencies, the play ultimately invites readers to feel positively towards colonialism and encourages the submission of subordinates through sympathy garnered through Prospero's actions, coupled with the success and failure of Ariel and Caliban's views on enslavement, respectively.”

## ARTIFACT 6: Essay three, professor's feedback

“The main shortcomings with the essay are structural, and relate to both how you’ve worded the thesis statement, and then how this affected the second half of the essay. Your thesis focuses on two very different topics – one related to Prospero himself, and the second related to Ariel and Caliban’s respective attitudes towards slavery. While they both generally follow an argument that the play “supports colonialism,” they do so in totally different ways – the first by generating sympathy for the colonizer, the second by focusing on the behavior of colonized slaves – and rhetorically the differences prove more striking than the similarities.”

## ARTIFACT 7: Essay three, second body paragraph evidence one

“After a discussion with Ferdinand, he requests that Ariel summon spirits to put on an elaborate play, saying, “Bestow upon the eyes of this young couple / Some vanity of mine art. It is my promise, / And they expect it from me (4.1.39-42). In this scene, Prospero is clearly supporting his daughter and her engagement, and it is hard for us, as readers, to not feel inclined to identify with Prospero here. His actions incite empathy from readers, as we can see ourselves attempting to impress our child’s spouse in hopes of better welcoming them into the family.”

## ARTIFACT 8: Essay three, second body paragraph evidence two

“A reader’s identification with Prospero extends even further into the epilogue, where Prospero directly addresses the audience, asking for applause from their “good hands” (Epilogue 10). The play is very literally asking for the audience to support Prospero and let him be free. This act, as previously mentioned, directly correlates to the audience cheering for colonialism.”

## ARTIFACT 9: Essay three, professors opening feedback

“Generally speaking, your argument does a pretty good job of using evidence to support its claims; the second body paragraph (on how easy it is to identify with Prospero) particularly sticks out, but the rest of the essay also seems well supported.”

## ARTIFACT 10: In class notes

regarding essay three

## November 3, 2023

Remember: It works better to ask a question before writing a thesis, not the other way around.

## Gathering Evidence Activity

To what extent do you feel *The Tempest* invites its audience to identify with Prospero and his colonial project?

## Two Pieces of evidence for each side

## In Favor of Identification

- Epilogue - Breaks the fourth wall and puts the audience in the position of power.
- Theatre scene when he is controlling the performance. We feel appreciation of his work and can identify with his celebratory magic usage 4.1
- Prospero controls and manipulates the play. He seems to know everything, and acts almost as an audience member in some scenes, like 3.1 and 3.3
- Prospero exploits Isabella 1.2.345-347
- Prospero protects daughter 1.2.347-349
- Prospero and Ariel work together to be all-knowing beings throughout the whole play - acts as a viewer
- Prospero sharing origin story with Miranda, saying he's avenger of his brother's violence → sympathy 1.2. 66-116

## In Favor of Alienation

- His actions and position of power cause us to feel disconnected from him, especially when he boasts on Ariel 1.2.244 and other manipulation
- Prospero's commandment of Ariel at the beginning of the play 1.1 alienates us because of his use of destructive power, like 1.2 with revenge
- Hearing about Caliban's torture from Caliban himself makes us feel as if Prospero is an evil man, separating us from him 2.2.1-17
- Threatening Ferdinand 4.1.13-23
- Prospero is compared to a tyrant by Caliban, 1.2. Power is destructive magic, storm, torturous enslavement, imprisonment, etc. He does torture Caliban
- Prospero's Authoritarianism: Enslaves Natives, orders people. Most of the audience doesn't have power/influence like him
- Prospero's explicit control of Miranda and others

ARTIFACT 11: Essay three, fourth body paragraph opening

“The success found by nearly all of the characters in the play further emphasizes pro-colonialist views while also reinforcing the notion that slaves should be loyal to their masters. Caliban, being the target of Prospero’s aggression, finally decides that he will try to be a more loyal and wise servant to Prospero in Naples (5.1.295-298). Being the only true anti-colonial force in the play, his supposed submission to Prospero can be connected to his submission to colonialism itself.”

ARTIFACT 12: Essay three, professor’s criticism of structure

“More importantly, your argument seems to jump around a bit in the second half of the paper; you start out with an analysis of Ariel and Caliban and their attitudes towards slavery (a paragraph that tries to discuss too much in too condensed of a space), but then switch to a paragraph on the “success” of characters in the play (which ends with a discussion of Caliban), and finish with a paragraph on Caliban and Ferdinand (which in many respects jumps back to Prospero).”