

GENERAL WRITING GUIDELINES

1. **Your critical writing should have an argument.** It is not enough to simply state a fact about the book or article that you've read: "Douglass's is a powerful argument against racism in 19th century America." Your argument should be one that another person might argue against: "Douglass's argument uses the following observations about the languages spoken by people of African descent in order to refute certain racist arguments about the alleged inferiority of Blacks. Firstly," This is a stronger thesis because it is already contemplating the "how" and "why" of Douglass's arguments. It also allows the space for another person to say, "I don't think that's true at all," and develop his or her own thesis in opposition to it.
2. **Give your writing a title that is both interesting and indicates the angle of your argument or the subject of your narrative.**
 - a. "Paper #1" or "My Thoughts on Douglass's speech" are not strong titles.
 - b. "Examining the linguistic bases of Douglass's egalitarian claims about Blacks" is a clear and informative title that adequately prepare your reader for your piece.
3. **Avoid generalizations.** Avoid sweeping statements that detract from the close reading you are performing. Comments about "all readers," "all novels," or "the human condition" place you on a slippery slope towards generalizations. Danticat may be writing about the lost history of the Massacre victims, but this text does not necessarily apply to all of those people, or to all Caribbean people. Rather than thinking about a text as "representative of," think about what makes it unique. This will strengthen your close readings.
4. **Do not summarize the plot.** Since the text has already been written, there is no need for you to write it again. You are creating your own analysis or narrative about your reading of the text, so a summary of the argument or plot is not necessary. Assume that your reader already has some familiarity with the text. Although it is sometimes necessary to give context (this happens after this or before that) that is all that your informed reader will need. Your analysis is what really interests your reader.
5. **Use multiple levels of analysis.** Your writing should vary the level of analysis so that it remains lively and engaging. Include the micro-level of close reading (looking at argumentation, language, word-choice, etc.) and also expand to the level of the idea (what do these linguistic choices mean) and the larger structure (what happens to the text as a result of these choices).
6. **Support your quotations.** As you use evidence to support your thesis, be sure to set up the quotation for the reader through clearly stating the point you are making with this evidence. "Unpack" the evidence by commenting on the specific features of the quotation that resonate with your argument.
7. **Avoid intentional fallacy.** Intentional fallacy is the attribution of intent to an author when it is not appropriate. We can't ever know what an author intended or thought, and authorial intent is not really the most important, or interesting, issue in a text. Instead discuss what an author's argument or language accomplishes, or how an analysis or a scene works, or in what position a certain claim or character places the reader.
8. **Strive for clarity, not impressiveness, in your writing.** A dictionary is a better friend than a thesaurus—you are looking for precision in your language, not grandeur. Your language should be concise, efficient, lively, and clear. Avoid stock phrases or clichés.

9. **Be conscious of your structure.** Your writing should move logically and should always have smooth transitions between paragraphs. It should not be a simple list or enumeration of your points. Laundry-list essays are often a sign of a descriptive or obvious thesis. Work to include some twists and surprises, but keep to a logical structure.

10. **Know your reader and your writer!** The assumption when writing an essay for class is that you are writing for the professor. This is true. Another assumption is that you are writing for a grade. This is also true, but neither of these assumptions is true in the way that many people think. In other words, don't write your essay for me, or for a grade. Write an essay for a person who would be interested in the topic and the text (like your classmates), and write an essay that is for you! You need to be interested in your topic and in the text that you choose. Your enthusiasm for your own work speaks volumes on the written page. So have fun (or as much fun as you can) with it and feel free to share it with anyone (friends, family, facebook) who might also be interested.

Some other important points the presentation of your papers:

- Include your name, 24.908, date, and title on the first page. Be sure to double-space, use a normal (Times New Roman, Garamond, etc.) 12-point font, and 1-1.25 inch margins. You do not need to include a title page. It wastes paper.
- **Number your pages.**
- Cite quotations correctly. Consult the *MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers*.

Portions of this handout were developed from a handout by Dr. Laura Theimann Scales.

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