

Essay Assignment 1: Literary Analysis

Introduction:

Your *Writer's Handbook* chapter "What are the Humanities?" argues that interpretation is the primary method of analysis used by scholars of the humanities, and thus the method of analysis that you will employ as a participant in the Humanities Core Course. It defines interpretation as a process that changes according to one's contexts. Thus, the process of interpretation is not only different for the various humanistic disciplines; but it is different for each person. It is the process by which each person uses their unique world view to find and create meaning.

Your first assignment will be to interpret a poetic work—Homer's *The Iliad*. Because this mode of interpretation is literary analysis, you will be engaging in what Professor Izenberg has called *close reading*—the formal description and interpretation of carefully selected portions of a literary work. When literary scholars close-read texts, they examine how the literary components of a text create meaning (components such as theme, symbolism, diction or meter). The reading is "close" because it examines selectively-chosen portions of a text (paragraphs, stanzas, or even individual words) that are described, and given value, from a specific point of view—from one "reading."

The exciting part about engaging in literary analysis is that the very process of writing often teaches you insightful, surprising, and even paradoxical, lessons about the text. The close reading happens as your writing takes place. You may begin your drafting process on *The Iliad* with a specific thesis in mind, but your close examination of the evidence may lead you to fresh realizations about the text's meaning. The process of interpretation opens you up to the unexpected.

Assignment:

There is a longstanding philosophical and political tradition that argues that humans possess *agency*: the capacity to act in ways that matter—insofar as they act autonomously, without the determining of outside forces such as gods, force, or fate.

In a passage from *The Iliad* (chosen by your section leader), analyze how the characters wrestle with the causes and consequences of their own action. Then defend an argument that demonstrates *how* the passage defines the scope and quality of human agency.

Your paper must be 3-4 pages in length and will be worth 25% of your writing grade.

The Writing Process:

After re-reading Professor Izenberg's *Writer's Handbook* chapter on close reading, identify and explain the formal elements of the passage—its figures of speech, diction, imagery, tone, use of repetition, etc.—that relate to the question of human agency. (Keep in mind that this poem

appears in translation so that an examination of meter and rhyme may not be appropriate). How do these pieces of evidence address the prompt? Write a working-thesis, or an interpretation, of this evidence. As you begin writing, you will notice your working-thesis becoming more specific and refined, if not changing altogether. When your initial reading is complete, return to your working-thesis and revise based upon what your interpretation has taught you.

The passage your instructor chooses may not refer to all forms of human agency—as they relate to human events, gods, or fate. It almost certainly will not conceive of agency in absolute terms—as something humans do or do not possess. In the process of refining your thesis, you will be making qualitative assessments about the form and scope of agency—that is, *how* it exists, not whether it exists.

Student Learning Goals:

- Make specific, clear, arguable claims
- Produce cohesive paragraphs
- Present well-selected evidence that is well-contextualized and explained
- Develop strong warrants
- Understand and perform the assumptions and methods of literary analysis
- Engage in active revision (in which the final submitted draft of your paper exhibits a careful reflection, and working through, of numerous drafts).