

# Research Essay Guidelines

## ENGL 209 – Past Times: Literature and History

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- DUE:** R 04/22 in Blackboard by the end of the day (11:59pm)  
(submitted as a .doc or .txt document – NOT pasted into the assignment window)
- LENGTH:** 1800-2400 words (about 6-8 pages)  
1” margins; All Double Spaced; 10-12 pt Times or equivalent font  
All quotes from the text and from secondary sources properly cited
- FORMAT:** Research Essay - see sample in Blackboard for page layout

### Topic/Focus

I do not assign topics; part of the goal here is for you to formulate your own topic and thesis. But your research essay should directly address the primary Liberal Studies Learning Outcome for the class:

**Examine critically various cultures through historical and contemporary contexts at the local, national, and/or global levels.**

So your essay must address, to some extent, how you understand the culture of the Middle Ages, as reflected in the literature we have read, and compare it to your own culture. I recommend the following:

- **Identify a question** in one or more of the texts we have read.  
(for example, is Boccaccio portraying the women in the frame of the *Decameron* as weak/naïve, or are they being sarcastic and therefore represent sexually aware and strong female characters?)
- **Identify AT LEAST TWO REASONABLE/POSSIBLE ANSWERS** to that question. If there aren't multiple reasonable/possible answers, it isn't a good question because the answer is obvious and uncontested.  
(for example, either they are sincere in their desire to be ruled by men, and therefore Boccaccio is reflecting the misogynistic attitudes of the Middle Ages, or they are being ironic, which suggests Boccaccio is portraying them as independent and sophisticated characters who are aware of their own sexual desires).
- **State which answer you think is the best one and why** (this is your thesis). Don't forget the "why" – is it based on certain scenes, the way they talk about something, the tales they tell, etc.
- **Quote from and analyze/discuss specific passages in support of your answer**, or to oppose the other possible answers. This will be the bulk of your essay. You must quote from the text – summery and vague references are too superficial. Discuss how the passages you quote support, develop, or defend your thesis. Include research on your topic here.
- Finally, **discuss how your analysis compares to the world around us**. In what was is our contemporary culture similar to or different from what you have discussed? Be specific (feel free to reference pop culture, movies, politics, book, etc.) but be as specific as possible (that is, you may wish to cite specific movies, shows, news stories, etc.)

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### Research

This essay must incorporate at least 4 professional secondary sources on your topic: peer reviewed professional scholarship that has been published in a reputable academic/professional journal or other venue. That means web pages are out (at least for that 4-source requirement). Professional sources accessible online (via an online full text database) are acceptable, but they cannot be popular sources (newspapers, magazines, etc); they must be professional, academic sources (scholarly journals, academic books, etc.).

#### *Cite All Sources*

- Cite all sources using any standard citation format (MLA, APA, Chicago, etc.). I know them all and you should know one of them by now; if not, learn one (visit WALC for example).
- Copying material from *any* online or print source, and not citing that source properly, is a form of plagiarism
  - *Failure to do cite a source or quote (plagiarism) will result in Failure in the Course – see syllabus.*
  - *Failure to follow a standard citation format (MLA, Chicago/Turabian, APA) will result in a one-full letter grade reduction (-10 points) in the final grade for the assignment.*

### Suggestions

- Work on something you enjoyed reading. It's tough to write a paper of this length on something you don't like.
- If you have a question about why somebody did something or why something happened the way it did, that's a perfect way to begin the paper.
- Try focusing on a brief passage, or even a single word; writing on multiple tales/works inevitably leads to a superficial essay. Spend some time with each passage quoted; don't be in a rush to move on.
- DON'T
  - merely (or overly) summarize the plot or simply compare and contrast works/passages.
  - Instead, write about how passages support, develop, and defend your argument.
  - rely upon generalizations (“well, that’s the way it was back then . . .”).
  - Instead, research how it really was, discuss what you found, and cite your sources.

### Texts

You may certainly refer to other works for support, but I want the paper primarily to be about what we've read in this class this semester.

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### Research Essay Rubric

	3	2	1 or 0
<b>Thesis</b>			
<b>Quality of Thesis</b>	Identifies a question or issue in the text and posits a contestable <sup>1</sup> answer to that question/issue.	Posits a thesis, but that thesis is simple and/or obvious. It may mirror class observation or summarize an argument detailed in class.	The essay does not appear to contain a thesis. It may rely primarily upon plot summary.
<b>Clarity of Thesis</b>	Thesis is presented clearly initially and integrated throughout the essay.	Thesis is unclear. Reader must work to understand for what the essay is arguing.	Lacking thesis or unable to understand thesis.
<b>SLO: Examine critically medieval culture</b>	Thoughtful and supported analysis of topic of medieval culture at hand, esp. as it relates to today	Some discussion of the ways in which medieval culture is represented in the texts. May not provide much comparison to today.	Little to no discussion of the characteristics of medieval culture exhibited in the texts. May not support statements with specific references or analysis. May not relate to today.
<b>Argument</b>			
<b>Organization</b>	Argument progresses in a logical manner.	Argument is difficult to follow. Readings are not always related to thesis/argument. Sections "jump around," organizational issues.	Argument is incomprehensible. Readings or summaries do not relate to thesis.
<b>Use of primary text<sup>2</sup></b>	Regularly quotes from relevant passages from the text. Relies on specific quotes more than summary.	Quotes some from the text(s) but relies as much or more upon summary and general references.	Does not quote from the text. Relies on generalizations.
<b>Analysis of Texts</b>	Adequately discusses passages from the text and shows how those passages support, develop, and defend the essay's thesis/argument.	Incorporates some discussion/analysis of references, but usually does not adequately analyze/discuss the passages to show how they support the argument/thesis.	Incorporates little (or no) analysis of appropriate texts to support, develop, or defend the essays argument/thesis.
<b>Research - Peer Reviewed Professional Published ("print") sources<sup>3</sup></b>			
<b>#</b>	4 or more	2-3	0-1
<b>Quality of Secondary Research</b>	All of the sources are clearly scholarly and relate to the topic.	Some of the secondary research may derive from inappropriate (non-scholarly) sources. Some may not relate to topic.	Most or all of the secondary research derives from inappropriate (non-scholarly) sources and/or do not relate to topic.
<b>Cited correctly</b>	Adheres to a standard citation format with only minor errors. (MLA, Chicago, Turabian, APA, IEEE, etc.)	Appears to follow a standard citation format, but significant number of errors.	Does not follow a standard citation format or does not cite information. <b>NOTE: this will result in a significant grade reduction</b>
<b>Writing</b>			
<b>Mechanics (typos, punctuation, spelling,)</b>	Few or no mechanical or typographical errors; none significant enough to affect comprehension.	A number of mechanical/ typographical errors - usually a few per page. Errors significant enough at times to affect comprehension.	Significant number of mechanical or typographical errors. Consistent errors in usage. Errors prevent comprehension.
<b>Style</b>	Sentence variety and diction is more advanced. Style appropriate to an academic research paper.	Sentence variety may be repetitive and/or simplistic; syntax or diction may be awkward, but does not detract significantly from clarity. Style may be somewhat inappropriate to an academic research essay (i.e. too conversational).	Essay's sentence variety (or lack thereof), syntax, and diction are such that the reader cannot comprehend its argument. Style may be inappropriate to academic research essay (i.e. hostile, vulgar, colloquial, etc.).

<sup>1</sup> Contestable (or *able to be argued against or disputed; more than one supportable possible answer*) – A good thesis should not revolve around an obvious answer. If the answer is obvious, and no one would argue against it, why bother writing about it? So think of a good thesis as an answer to a question that has more than one possible answer. A good argument will argue for one of those answers being better than the others. So consider how you can both support your own argument and also show how it is a better answer than other possible answers.

<sup>2</sup> Remember, when analyzing a piece of writing the words become your evidence, your data, in support of your argument. The essay must quote from the text and then show and discuss at length how those passages support/develop/defend your argument and/or refute other possible answers.

<sup>3</sup> We discussed in class on a couple of different days what this means. These are sources that are published in professional academic journals and books. They may be available online (via a database or possibly an online journal) but that process of publication through peer review ensures a certain level of validity that you should be able to recognize.