Writing the Academic Essay in English 252: The Process of Writing

By David Cope

Research

Choose your topic and consider narrowing it down according to the requirements of the essay (number of pages). A paper on women’s issues in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* and *As You Like It* cannot be handled, for example, in 6 pages: you have two older couples and two younger couples in the first play, and four relationships in the second, which means you’d have to write about eight women in 6 pages. Better to narrow it down and address one from each play so that you can do justice to them.

Collect evidence:

a. If you’re writing about Hermia and Rosalind, for example, find all the passages where each character appears in her play. You’ll need to get a feel for the arc or trajectory of the character, to see how she grows and changes in the course of the play, and mark out the major quotes that could work for you in your paper.

b. It’s good to get some intelligent commentary on each character, too, to help you shape your understanding of what you read. The simplest way is to read the essays in Bloom’s *Shakespeare: the Invention of the Human*, or to find a book on Shakespeare’s comedies. Some characters are important enough to warrant books just on them—Rosalind, for example, is studied extensively in Bloom’s critical study entitled *Rosalind*. You can also explore online, whether with high school level critical study, such as may be found at Sparknotes—generally a little simplistic, but at least they ask the right questions and do give some overview—but occasionally you can also find serious critical studies using the same passwords. You should also consider checking out online databases such as Academic Onefile (click on Databases at the GRCC Library homepage).

Assimilation

Start early so that your research has time to “cook”—so that you can ponder it and explore how to organize it in your paper, but also to raise questions about it with me or others and get second opinions. Students who wait until the last minute don’t have time for this, and as a result, their papers are usually hurried and not fully thought out.

Outline

"Game plan": an outline, whether the formal variety or simply a list of how you’re going to organize the materials of your essay, is basically a game plan—and like any other game plan, you may modify or abandon it when, in the writing of your essay, you find a direction you hadn’t thought of when you first set it up. Remember that writing is often a journey of discovery, and you may have to adjust the essay according to what the evidence actually gives you, rather than what you thought it was when you first organized your approach to it.
First Draft

<”Letting go”: organize your sources and those materials you may want to quote so that they’re readily available when you write—you don’t want to scramble to find something every time you need a quote or to find a source that is necessary to a section of your essay.

<It’s often a good idea to write the body of the paper first, exploring what your premises, the supporting evidence and critical statements actually “do.” The body of the paper is really the journey you have to make, and when you get done with it, you’ll have a better idea of what your thesis should be, and how to approach it in the introduction.

<Introduction: remember that you need to introduce the subject clearly and concisely (in the example, the heroines Hermione and Rosalind in their respective plays), show why their trajectories are important, and provide the thesis that will give a direction to your paper. Sometimes a student will note, for example, the overbearing patriarchy of Shakespeare’s age, which makes it all the more remarkable that his heroines have such spunk and understanding of how to empower themselves and find the best possible match despite the many pitfalls they face. This allows you to introduce the two heroines and perhaps touch on the differences in the lessons they embody. Some papers even provide a kind of path to show how they will prove this—naming the major premises of the paper. You can refine the introduction, and especially your thesis statement, once you have finished this first “trial run.”

<Conclusion: the conclusion is the most condensed part of the essay—transition from the body of the text, restatement of the thesis collected together with the major premises of the paper which proved it to be true. The old critic Maynard Mack used to call this the “crowing” section of the paper—like a rooster, you imply that you said you’d proved X, and having shown the supporting premises to be true, you can now “crow” over the fact that these premises show the truth of the thesis.

<Quotes, parenthetical references and Works Cited: as you finish the first draft, make sure you have enough quotes from the primary text (evidence from Shakespeare) and from any other sources you used. You don’t want the paper top-heavy on quotes, but you certainly want them in places where they drive a point home beyond question. Check with me if you have questions.

Revision (as many times as necessary)

<”Global”: this sort of revision looks at the “big issues” of the paper: organization and development.

  a. **Organization:** First, you have to be sure that you have introduced information in the right order, that there’s a “logic” to the way you have organized it, and that you have provided transitions that create a flow in the essay so that the reader understands why she/he is moving from one part of a subject or of the essay to another. Paragraphing is important, too: not too long, but not too short, either. Pay attention to format and other issues noted on the grading sheet, too.
b. **Development:** You have to weigh the logic and use of evidence in development of the essay —clarity of presentation (are there areas where the reader can’t figure out what you’re saying?), whether premises—claims—are overstated or understated, given what the evidence implies, whether you have enough clear evidence to support the claim, and if you’ve ignored evidence that would contradict what you’re saying, etc. It’s good to have feedback from a good critical reader who knows the text, if you can find someone—another student, an editing session with me, or someone else.

<”Local”: local issues include grammar and mechanics, and documentation. These make up the “small stuff” that can sink even a good paper.

a. **Grammar and mechanics:** see the style sheet. If you’re fairly confident with sentence structure, punctuation and the like, write the paper and put it away for a while, then come back and read it aloud sentence by sentence, to be sure that each sentence is carefully constructed and clear in its meaning, and to weigh whether you need to make changes in punctuation. Remember that, if you can’t figure out whether you need a comma at a specific place in a sentence, you can copy it into an email and ask me. If, on the other hand, you’re not very confident about these things, you can bring it to the writing lab and get help.

b. **MLA DOCUMENTATION:**

1. For all documentation questions, refer to the Diana Hacker MLA page:

   http://www.dianahacker.com/resdoc/p04_c08_s2.html

   **I. FORMAT**

   1. **Use a standard font** (e.g. the standard academic font, Times New Roman, or a basic sans serif font, such as Arial) in 11 or 12 point type. **Margins:** one inch on all sides.

   2. **Use MLA header for first page:** center your title; double space throughout the paper, except in the case of inset quotations of poetry (see #9 and #10, in this list).

   3. **Pagination:** After page one, the following pages should feature your last name and page number in the upper right hand corner, as here. Use continuous pagination throughout, and place the Works Cited on the final page of your paper.

   **II. PARENTHEtical REFERENCES for En 252**

   1. **Document evidence** (quotation and paraphrase from the text) taken from most essays by page number. For example, when quoting from page 64 in Northrop Frye's *Anatomy of Criticism*, your reference should read as follows: (Frye 64). Note: Don't document in the old way, e.g. (p. 1). For
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essays taken from an online source, document by author’s last name (if known), or by the first significant words in the title of the essay. Do not document via homepage or URL.

2. **When one is discussing more than one play**, select the abbreviations of titles from the MLA list of Shakespearean title abbreviations. See [http://web.cn.edu/kwheeler/documents/Abbrev_Shakespeare_Titles.pdf](http://web.cn.edu/kwheeler/documents/Abbrev_Shakespeare_Titles.pdf) for the full list.

3. **When documenting quotations from a play**, the preferred contemporary format is in arabic numerals. For example, one would cite lines from *The Tempest* as follows: (*Tmp.* 1.2.33-36). The citation represents act, scene, and actual lines quoted. Note that periods—not commas—separate act, scene, and line numbers.

4. **Broken lines**: Shakespeare’s famous iambic pentameter line (poetry) is sometimes broken for dramatic purposes, or shared between two characters. In such cases, both the first and last part of the line share the same line number, as follows: For example:

   13 He was a gentleman on whom I built
   14 An absolute trust.
   14 [TO MACBETH] O worthiest cousin!

5. **When documenting a performance**, note the performance you witnessed in your prose and, if you quote from the text while discussing it, document via textual reference, as in #3 above.

6. **Keep quotations to a minimum.** Summarize what you see in the text largely in your own words, using quotations to emphasize important points or to illustrate what you're getting at.

7. **Integrate quotations into your sentences.** Don't just place a quotation as a separate sentence; doing so destroys the connection between the quotation and the point you're trying to make, and also creates a choppy effect in the prose. For example: The play has many of the qualities of savage comedy, including the apparent aim of stripping "self-centered society of its dearest illusions" (Gianakaris 35).

8. **Never follow a quotation with a quotation.** See number 4 above.

9. **Quote exactly.** If a quotation won't fit into your sentences because it would be grammatically incorrect, or if it's too long and you could cut sections out of the middle of it without distorting the meaning, you may use **ellipsis periods** (three spaced periods) to indicate words left out, or **square brackets** to add a word or phrase that would integrate the quoted material more fully into your sentence. For example: Dante summarizes his canto with Beatrice's explanation that "the deep design of God would have been broken [had the pilgrim] . . . not discharged the debt of penitence" (*Purgatorio* 30. 142-45).

11. **Short quotations:** When documenting quotations, the parenthetical reference follows the last quotation mark and **precedes** any punctuation (period, comma, etc.) when the quotation is placed in your text.
12. **Long quotations:** When the quotation is longer (four or more lines), inset the quotation (double indent). Such inset quotations require no quotation marks, and the parenthetical reference is placed after the final period of the quotation. **If a long quotation is poetry,** as in a Shakespeare play, quote it as in the text, following the author's line breaks exactly.

The fairies in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* are not simply spirits dancing in the night; the worldly powers of Oberon and Titania are made clear when Titania claims that because of their argument,

The ox hath therefore stretch'd his yoke in vain,
The ploughman lost his sweat, and the green corn
Hath rotted ere his youth attain'd a beard.
The fold stands empty in the drowned field,
And crows are fatted with the murrion flock. (2.1.93-97)

10. **All prose quotations are to be double-spaced**—even those in inset quotations. Quotations of poetry should be single-spaced, as above.

### III. WORKS CITED: FORM OF THE ENTRY

1. **Alphabetize the entry** according to the first significant word in it, usually the author's last name, but sometimes (when the author is unknown) by the first significant word in the title.

2. **Publishing houses are abbreviated:** Random, Princeton U P, St. Martin's, etc.

3. **Double-space throughout the Works Cited.**

4. **Examples** (Note: Check *The MLA Handbook* for complete listings of the kinds of citations necessary for CD-ROM and internet sources).

A **single book by a single author:**


A **text within a text (an article, essay, poem, or short story in an anthology):**

Two or more authors:

An introduction:


Emphasis on editors:

An essay or article from a journal:

Live Performance:

A Film:
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An Online Posting:


A Posting with a Print Analogue:

Schneider, Jr., Ben Ross. "King Lear In Its Own Time: The Difference That Death Makes."

An Email Message
Frank, Emilia. "Re: your essay." Message to the author. 16 March 2010. E-mail.

Entry in a Blog
Grenier, Robert. “A Testament (Martin Richet / Robert Creeley, ‘Figure of Outward’).”
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Cope 8

Style: Checklist of Common Problems

1. **Problem words**

   - **to**: connecting word, e.g. "we went to the store."
   - **their**: possessive, e.g. "their car."
   - **too**: synonym for *also*.
   - **there**: ref. to place, e.g. "over there."
   - **it's**: contraction of "it is."
   - **its**: possessive, e.g. "it went its own way."
   - **your**: possessive, e.g. "your car."
   - **you're**: contraction of "you are."

2. **Format**

   - <MLA header? MLA pagination? Parenthetical references all correct? Works Cited? >
   - <Double-space throughout, except in inset quotations of poetry.>

3. **Notations**

   - **Circled words**: typos, improperly placed punctuation or quotation marks.
   - **WC**: word choice—the word doesn't make sense in its context.
   - **WO**: word order—rearrange the order of words in the sentence.
   - **s/pl or pl/s**: noun-pronoun agreement.

   **Comma**: If you have problems with commas, review the rules and check commas for proper placement on your final drafts. Be careful of overusing them as well.

   **Comma, intro clause**: Dependent clauses leading into an independent clause normally require a comma.

   **CS**: comma splice (joining two independent clauses with a comma).

   **DM**: dangling modifier; introductory clause doesn't modify the subject of the sentence.

   **RW or AWK**: "rework" or "awkward": refers to grammatical structure of the sentence.

   **Frag**: "fragment"—an incomplete sentence (lacks a subject or active verb or object).

   **RO**: run-on sentence—generally, any sentence of more than four clauses risks being a run-on.

   **Choppy**: a tendency to write too many simple sentences, as in an elementary reader.

   **Fused**: sentence lacks punctuation; you have literally fused clauses together.

   **Parallel**: preserve parallel structure of verbs in succeeding clauses.

   **s/v agr**: subject and verb don't agree in number (singular / plural, vice-versa).

   **(¶) Paragraphing**: Too short: development? not making connections with ideas in adjoining paragraphs? Too long (more than 2/3 of a page): not enough divisions in ideas?

   **Trans**: You need a transitional word or phrase to adequately indicate shifts and/or connections between paragraphs or the parts of your subject.

   **Unity**: Paragraph lacks unity, usually because some sentences don't relate to the topic sentence.

   **Ital**: Use italics here, as in a word understood as a word, or with titles of large works.

   **Numbers**: numbers under 100 and used as adjectives should be spelled out.

   **Cap / No Cap**: capitalize / don't capitalize.