

Paper 2 Preparation

Thoughts on Writing Critically About Two Texts

In writing about two texts, you navigate between the Scylla of similarity and the Charybdis of difference. On the one hand, in order for the conjunction of two texts to make a persuasive structure for your paper, you will have to assert that your two texts have something notable in common; on the other hand, in order to find a sufficiently rich and interesting theme for your paper, you will have to do more than merely assert that the two objects do the same thing in the same way. Likewise, the specific techniques of analysis you deploy must be both unified—in order to establish the consistency of your point of view—and dissimilar—in order to produce variety and not to reduce the two texts to two indistinguishable examples of the same abstract principle.

These cautions are meant to apply equally whether you discuss two poems by the same author, two poems by different authors, or one poem and one nonpoetic text. Go beyond "comparing and contrasting" to consider the full range of possible relationships between two connected texts: thesis and antithesis; primary and secondary alternatives; theory and practice; statement and retraction; deception and revelation; early attempt and later achievement; early achievement and later decline; and so on. Your paper, in short, should first construct a relationship between your two texts—in full consciousness that every such relationship is a construction—and then go on to problematize that relationship. These twin tasks are accomplished partly by your explicit statements, but—just as importantly—also by the design of your paper. Think carefully about your order of presentation of evidence.

Two is a difficult number; it demands generalization without furnishing enough evidence for a full justification. With two poems, for example, one is often compelled simply to say, "These two poems face the same problem and solve it differently." That's quite all right—but the conclusion to such an argument must at least suggest why different solutions to the same problem are chosen. The best way to approach that conclusion is to hew close to detailed readings of both texts, taking for granted as little as possible what each says and how it says it.

Admonishment: Mechanics

Please follow the conventions of standard written American English. I am liberal but uneasy on such issues as the split infinitive and the sentence-final preposition. For citations and bibliography, you are asked to consult the guidelines in the pamphlet *Some Matters of Form*. Format papers double-spaced and in twelve-point font,

with numbered pages and 1 or 1.25 inch margins (to leave room for comments). Beware the distracting power of even a single blemish—or, conversely, remember that the gleam of a polished surface can be very helpful for distracting the eye from the cracks or flaws that might lie underneath.

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