

Final Paper Guidelines

Length: 2500 words (minimum)
Due: *first draft* to Anne Bellows at the Composition Center
no later than Monday, March 1, 1:45 p.m.
final version Monday, March 8, 1:45 p.m. (in class)

General Advice

Your goal in writing this paper is to arrive at an original point of view on the techniques and meanings of the *Iliad* through the quotation and close analysis of well-chosen passages. In a paper of this length, you can be expected to bring together *all* the *most important* texts bearing on your topic—that is to say, your paper will be judged partly on how well you have chosen the passages that best support a complex and provocative thesis about the literary art with which the *Iliad* was composed.

Do not simply illustrate that one of the poem's large themes can be seen at work in specific passages. Your close readings should produce enough complicating and surprising nuances so that, by the end of the paper, your understanding (and the reader's) of the poem's larger concerns have been (not merely exemplified, but) altered and given new meaning. At the very minimum, we should understand how Homer has realized one of the familiar, big ideas through some technique of literary construction that would not be evident to readers who have not done your work of analysis.

“Complicating” and “surprising” do not mean far-fetched and unconvincing. The paper must demonstrate to the reader the good reasons for accepting its conclusions. When looking for details on which an argument can be built, be bold in looking for what is interesting that goes beyond the obvious surface level. But you will have to discard any intriguing hypothesis if there is not further supporting evidence. One of the least convincing forms of literary interpretation is the bald assertion of some “hidden meaning” or surprising use of symbolism, etc., that is backed up by speculation and not by examples that prove the meaning/symbolic force/etc. was on Homer's mind.

A quick glance at a student paper can often reveal how effectively it is using the text to argue a supportable reading. Specifically, look at your writing to make sure it is using quotations plentifully and correctly. A good paragraph often introduces an interpretive idea, and then quotes a passage that will be *argued* to support it. (If simply quoting the passage “proves” the point, then the point was too obvious.) The follow-up argument to substantiate the claim usually involves bringing in other passages or other quoted details. Maybe, for example, what is distinctive about Achilles' rhetoric or thinking can be best demonstrated with a careful comparison to a “normal” counterexample. Additional examples are chosen for expanding and complicating the interpretation—helping it evolve a bit further. Less effective paragraphs often give a quote and then go on and on speculating about its meaning, without additional quotations or detail-based argumentation. Another form of less effective paragraph consists of several quotes, but each one is followed up by a restatement of what it obviously says, rather than an argument about what is significant in it.

Some Homer-specific tips

There is a lot to base a literary argument on in Homer besides just the presence of language that is cryptic or poetic. I want to emphasize this because too narrow a focus on difficult poetic language often loses the forest for the trees and is susceptible to the unfounded “hidden meaning” claims mentioned above. What else can you look at?

Recall how we have discussed the continuous line-by-line flow of Homeric epic and how Homer, almost like a film director, makes decisions about how to construct and regulate this thread of narrative time. These decisions can be analyzed for their significance. Is there anything particularly effective about the placement of the scene you’re interested in after the preceding scene and before the following one? In addition to this ordering of episodes, consider the narrative rhythm, both of individual speeches/passages and of the larger portions of the poem. The fact that the line is a measured and constantly repeated unit makes observing these rhythms easier. To what effect is Homer following a 55-line speech with an exchange of 3-line outbursts? (Compare our in-class observations about the rhythms of Achilles’ speech in Book 9.)

Go with your own original experience as a reader of the *Iliad*. Don’t just look for something you missed, look at the more complex story of literary art behind what you *already got* as a reader experiencing Homer’s poetry.

(A good paper starts with active reading—reading where you get involved and interested. Because you are a unique reader, you will be able to find something interesting to you that other readers would miss—connections and themes that jump out at you in an “aha!” moment where you feel that you really understood something about why Homer put his poem together in just the way it’s put together. In your paper, let me know what is in that reading that wouldn’t be obvious to just any reader. And convince me that it’s there by explaining how it comes across when the reader considers the right parts in the right light—in other words, considers the text the way you saw it.)

Still, it might be helpful to name some of the issues and themes that deeply absorbed Homer’s attention:

- human constructions of meaning in the face of war’s brutal killing power
- interpersonal connections (social and political) under the strain of war, and in the service of war
- the operation of transformative emotions (love, hate, pity, fear) on people suffering, and occasionally coping with, the stresses of war
- ideas of natural growth and decay, fertility and sterility, domestication and wilderness, etc.
- the nature of authority—an individual accepting the imperatives of a leader or of an unwritten social code
- human decision-making and motivation in a war context, flesh vs. mind, etc.
- the power of, and values attached to, narrative story and memory (stories within the *Iliad*); the weight of the imagined past and future on present characters; etc.
- tragic reflections on mortality as a physical fact to which humans apply meanings

Techniques to look out for include:

- the structure of passages and episodes
- the way a transition is made from one subject to another
- the way different ideas or images are placed beside one another
- the effect of such devices of language as repetitions, similes, etc.
- resemblances or echoes of things from elsewhere in the poem that aren't directly mentioned
- the play of different tones and styles against each other; speakers' rhetorical strategies
- the shifts in and out of time or place (for example, the insertion of stories about the past), and how these are meant to illuminate the significance attaching to the main events of the narrative

Important Reminder

All passages quoted or referred to **must** be followed with a parenthetical reference. For example, Diomedes is compared to “a lion advancing on the helpless herds unshepherded” (10.485).