Research Paper Guidelines

Description

Your major essay in the class, an approximately 8-10 page research paper, is designed to build on the work you’ve already done in your annotated bibliography. Now that you’ve read the book carefully, discussed it in class, and researched some ideas that have been published about it, you should be ready to develop your own argument. Your paper should present a specific, well-focused, argument (your thesis) about some fairly narrow topic within the novel. While the main point of the paper is for you to provide your own argument about your focused topic, you should also place this argument within a critical context or conversation. The paper should be constructed so as to carefully support your argument—it should persuade your readers that your interpretation is plausible, interesting, original, well-thought-out, and well-researched.

I will be happy to discuss your research, your thesis, or a rough draft with you before the paper is due. Feel free to drop by my office hours or make an appointment if you’d like to discuss your paper with me in more detail.

Due Dates

Research papers are due two weeks after your presentation on the book (see reading schedule). Thus, due dates are staggered throughout the semester. Some of you will complete the bulk of written work for the course early on, others not until the end of the semester. I’ve discovered that students write better papers when their due date is closer to the time they actually read and discussed the book.

Format

You must cite at least 4 outside sources in the paper (not including the book itself—this is the primary source and should be included on your works cited page, but it’s not one of the 4 outside sources). You are welcome to cite more than 4 sources, but remember that the focus of the paper is your own argument, not a summary of critical views. The paper should be double-spaced and free of grammatical errors. Sources should be cited according to MLA guidelines—a system of internal citations and works cited page at the end.
**Hints for Successfully Choosing a Topic**

- **Focus, focus, focus.** Do not choose an overly broad subject such as “Identity in *Song of Solomon.*” Instead, narrow your topic. Rather than trying to cover all aspects of the struggle to find identity, focus on one of the following questions: How does a particular character (such as Pilate or Macon Dead or Guitar) shape Milkman’s view of himself? How do certain motifs or patterns of imagery (such as recurring images of birds, for instance) help us understand Milkman’s search for identity? How does a particular aspect of Milkman’s identity, such as his social class or his gender, help shape his sense of self? How does a particular scene in the novel contribute to Milkman’s search for self?

- **As you're thinking about your focus in this paper, you might begin by looking back at the critical disagreements you discovered.** You may want to write a paper that enters into one of these disagreements. In this case, you'd begin by briefly summarizing the critical controversy, then your paper would go on to argue the view you take, providing plenty of evidence to support your reading. You're not, however, required to focus your paper on one of the critical disagreements you wrote about in your bibliography. If you choose this option, you should be sure you have something new and interesting to add to the conversation that is already out there. You might also look back at the position paper topics for ideas.

- **Focus on a particular repeated image or a recurring literary motif** (eyes/seeing in *Slaughterhouse-Five*; television, supermarkets, Hitler in *White Noise*; birds, jewelry, fairy tales in *Song of Solomon*; shoes, writing/the written word in, etc.) How does this repeated image or motif add to our understanding of the novel as a whole?

- **Consider comparing a narrow topic from your book to another we've read in the course:** How do Vonnegut’s and O’Brien’s intrusions as narrators into their own stories compare? Do DeLillo and Vonnegut agree in their views of modern technology? How does Morrison’s use of ghosts in her work compare with Erdrich’s? What do Smiley and Bechdel have to say about fatherhood? How does Erdrich’s treatment of the land/environmental issues compare to Smiley’s?

- **Research a political, social or historic sub-text in the novel, and explore how the author makes use of this in his or her work.** But again, be sure to choose a narrow enough topic that you can successfully address it in 8-10 pages. (For instance, researching the Vietnam War as background for *The Things They Carried* or the U.S. history of slavery for *Song of Solomon* would both be too big). Here are some ideas to get you started thinking: What new technologies in the mid-80’s might have added to the information anxiety expressed in *White Noise*? How do Mormon beliefs about sin and guilt shape Gary Gilmore’s worldview in *The Executioner’s Song*? How does Morrison make specific use of the Civil Rights Movement in *Song of Solomon*? How does Louise Erdrich incorporate historical confrontations between Ojibwa Indians and timber companies in the early decades of the twentieth century into her novel *Tracks*? What does the novel say about this history? How does information about repressed memory, a much-discussed topic in the early 90’s, affect our reading of *A Thousand Acres*? 