

# English 346: Contemporary American Fiction

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## 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

Thorough, complete drafts of research papers are due, in most cases, two weeks after your presentation on the book (see reading schedule). Thus, due dates for the drafts are staggered throughout the semester. Because we're a little compressed for time at the end of the semester due to hurricane cancellations, draft research papers of the final two books are due more quickly. **You should e-mail me your draft by midnight on its due date.** Drafts are not graded, but failure to turn in a complete draft on the due date will result in an automatic 15-point deduction on your final paper.

Final versions of the research paper **should be e-mailed to me by midnight on Wednesday, December 5.**

### 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 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 *Tracks*, 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 narrators compare, especially as they intrude into their own stories? Do DeLillo and Vonnegut agree in their views of modern technology? How does Morrison's use of ghosts or of mythology in her work compare with Erdrich's? What do Morrison and Spiegelman and/or Bechdel have to say about fatherhood? How do descriptions of homes/home places compare in Morrison and Bechdel?
- 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 clearly both be way 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 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? Does sociological/psychological information about the children of Holocaust victims seem relevant to *Maus*?