Kubus English 4, Senior Research Assignment – Act One, Spring 2017

Think of the senior research essay as a drama starring you, literary analysis, and research, a plot asking you to read and interact with others' ideas about a literary work. Each Act introduces a series of scenes, each with its own action. If done well, the play ends in your having a rich understanding of your chosen work and being prepared for the more research-intensive papers and projects you'll write in the next four years and beyond. (Yes, engineers write papers, too.)

Act One finds you writing an essay based solely on your own understanding of your chosen work without the advantage of class discussion or any other type of input—that means you and the words on the page, no Shmoop, no Googling, no other "research." Just you and your book, alone, in the fading night. Just as writers intended.

So have the courage to see what you think as you think it. And have the courage to be less than perfect. Developing your ability to think for yourself isn't easy. No one ever said it was. Here is the list of steps that will ultimately result in a final 5-7 page research essay, complete with due dates and values:

Assignment	**Due**	**Value**
Come to class having chosen your text	Friday, February 3	-
Book check 1 – Identify focus of reading	Monday, February 13	100 points
Book check 2 – Focused annotations and working hypothesis	Tuesday, February 21	100 points
Final Draft of Pilot Essay	Monday, February 27	500 points
Research Conferences	Monday, March 20 – Friday, April 7	200 points
Annotated Bibliography	Monday, April 10	300 points
Final Research Essay	Monday, April 24	1800 points

SCENE 1 – CHOOSING A WORK

Choose a work of literature from the list below. You want to find a text with which you are keen to spend a few months.

Achebe, *Things Fall Apart*
Aeschylus, *Agamemnon*
Austen, *Pride and Prejudice*
Beckett, *Waiting for Godot*
Brontë, *Jane Eyre*
Chekhov, *The Cherry Orchard*
Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*
Dickens, *Great Expectations*
Dostoevsky, *Crime and Punishment*
Euripides, *Medea*
Greene, *The Power and the Glory*
Hardy, *Far from the Madding Crowd*
Ibsen, *A Doll House*
Ishiguro, *The Remains of the Day*
Joyce, *The Dead*
Lermontov, *A Hero of Our Time*
Mahfouz, *The Thief and the Dogs*
Malamud, *The Fixer*
Miller, *All My Sons; Death of a Salesman; The Crucible*
Morrison, *Beloved*; *Song of Solomon*
Shakespeare, *Hamlet*; *King Lear*; *The Merchant of Venice*
Sophocles, *Oedipus the King*
Stoppard, *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*
Tolstoy, *The Death of Ivan Ilych*
Wharton, *The Age of Innocence*
Williams, *A Streetcar Named Desire*

Post your chosen work on this spreadsheet by Friday, February 3.

SCENE 2: READ THE WORK, DEVELOP A GOOD TOPIC AND WORKING HYPOTHESIS

Once you've cast your lot, read your chosen work. Read it slowly, lovingly. Annotate, take notes, mark passages to discover what you think is an interesting recurring theme, a characteristic of the style, or something in the structure that begs to be explained. Track that recurring element, paying attention to the ways in which the work deals with it—the words, the figurative language, the sentence structure, the imagery. Those details will help you later. You want to unlock the work's deeper mysteries. You want something to wrestle with. You want an interesting topic and a good working hypo***thesis***. (The introductions to the works often contain good hints of big topics about the works. Reading them is highly recommended.)

That topic and your hypothesis won't present themselves on the first reading, so read the work twice, or, if it's a play, see a production or two and watch as you read.

What makes a good topic? Something of interest to *you* and of importance in the work. Something that grows out of *your* reading of the work. Something that leads to a richer understanding of the work. Some examples from Seton Hall.

Let's take Balzac's *Pere Goriot* as an example.

Notice that the novel is full of social climbers. Then ask some basic questions. *Why? How does the novel use social climbing? How does the novel describe social climbing? Know the facts. What does the novel do to those who social climb? How might I understand the novel's theme about social climbing?*

Before you do any research or read anyone else's ideas, develop your own ***working hypothesis***, your claim about your topic based on your reading of the work. You might have noticed, for example, that the novel often compares social climbing with violent acts, even murder. You might also have noticed that nothing good happens to the social climbers: they end up broke and scandalized. Based on these observations about the novel's depiction of social mobility, you can develop a working hypothesis:

By using the vocabulary of violence to describe upward mobility in *Pere Goriot* and by showing the horrible fates of upwardly mobile characters such as Goriot and Anastasie, Balzac offers a critical judgment of those who would climb the social ladder.

That's your start, a solid claim to research, challenge, and develop.

Book checks:

On **Monday, February 13**, you will turn in your copy of the text so that I can make sure you've identified the focus of your reading. On the inside front cover of the book you are to list the topic and working hypothesis that is focusing your annotations. Then write out two or three questions that you're always trying to answer as you read. Recall the ones about social climbing in *Pere Goriot*: *Why? How does the novel use social climbing? How does the novel describe social climbing? What does the novel do to those who social climb? How might I understand the novel's theme about social climbing?* This will be a 100-point grade toward the final 3000.

What about the work do you find interesting, engaging? What THEME will your reading of the work focus on? The purpose of this theme/topic is to identify and state the focus of your reading and annotation.

You want to identify an interesting and rich THEME of the work, from which you also build a TOPIC.

This topic is also to become the foundation of your research project and so needs thoughtful reflection. Avoid the obvious or well-worn. Peer into facts. The questions should be of the why, how variety.

AN EXAMPLE USING AGAMEMNON FROM THE *ILIAD*.

THEME/TOPIC: The theme of suffering. Agamemnon's emotional nature and his reaction to suffering.

HYPOTHESIS: Agamemnon's immature, fearful reactions to suffering show the tragedy in his lack of wisdom and how he is trapped by the heroic code and by his own nature, both of which lie outside his control.

QUESTIONS: How does Agamemnon react to suffering? Why is he so quick to a kind of brittle anger and black despair? What is he so afraid of and why? Does his reaction to suffering show me anything interesting about the heroic code, maybe some way it binds men? How is his reaction to suffering different than Achilles'? Might Agamemnon be a foil to Achilles with respect to suffering?

Might Agamemnon be more sympathetic than I thought? Might he be a tragic figure? Should I pity him instead of hate him? Might Agamemnon show me the tragedy in the heroic code?

Then on **Tuesday, February 21**, you will turn in your copy of the text a second time for an annotation check, to demonstrate that you've made good on your promise to annotate *with a focus*. I'll be looking closely at the types of things you're marking in your text, the ways in which you're conversing with characters and the ideas. Another 100-point grade toward the final 3000.

SCENE 3: EXPLORATORY RESEARCH

Now do some exploratory research to see whether scholars find your hypothesis interesting too, and whether they've written articles, chapters of books, etc., about it. You want to make sure that sources are available for research on your topic and hypothesis. And you want to ensure that those articles will be interesting.

Your free use of online databases is limited to these: JSTOR, Cambridge Companions, and the Twayne Author Series, And *maybe* these: UC Press; Hathi Trust. *Maybe* because you'll need to run those sources by me first. Otherwise, no other online searches or sources qualify as research for your project. You'll need these usernames and passwords for off-campus database access. If you have trouble, see the librarian. Otherwise, you'll need to use old-fashioned books checked out from old-fashioned libraries. Hooray! University libraries are very cool.

Do a search at Rice's Fondren Library. Search your author's name as a subject and your work's title as a subject. See how many books the library holds. Bigger numbers are better.

For periodicals, I'd start my search with JSTOR since it's easy, fast, and very user-friendly. See video tutorials here.

You want to make absolutely sure (note the adverb) that you can find on-point, rich, informative, sources of varied opinions/insights for your hypothesis. Writing a research essay requires research. A successful research essay must have on-point, rich, informative sources of varied opinions/insights. Scholars and scholarship can get pretty pointless pretty fast. Beware. You'll need to scan-read the articles and books to overview their content. This is not a scene to skim. You're writing a research essay, remember. Good, insightful, usable, relevant research is a must.

You want to find your sources, saving them/recording them for later reading.

If your hypothesis turns up too little info, talk to me, or formulate another interesting hypothesis and search again.

SCENE 4: WRITE THE PILOT ESSAY

Due 27 February 2017 for 500 points of the 3000: final draft of essay, at least 1,200 words. I encourage you to have a conference before the 27th.

Now you write your own essay, turning your hypothesis into a thesis and arguing the way you have all year. Your argument should be about the function/role of the recurring element you've chosen. If you do this step well, you'll be prepared to converse with your sources.

Given the length of the essay, the old tried-and-true (and should-be-forgotten) five-paragraph essay model won't work. Once you have a thesis, decide on the developing topics/ideas your topic/thesis needs. Then, as you draft the arguments for those ideas, let paragraphs become units of thinking and composition. Follow the basic rules for paragraph writing: one paragraph=one unit of thinking; don't let paragraphs become so long that the reader forgets the main point; paragraph=emphatic unit. Not every developing idea will—or should—be one paragraph.

You will likely include small transition paragraphs and reminders of the essay's or section's main points. What you can expect a reader to remember in a three-page essay, you cannot expect him to remember in a six to eight-page essay. So keep your key ideas before his mind and refresh his memory of key arguments. In other words, build and maintain coherence. Remember the New Yorker article we reviewed in the fall.

My reading of your essay will be slightly different than it has been. Now, I'm very interested in your argument as an argument and your ability to sustain and maintain that argument. I'm more interested than I have been in the intellectual merits of what you say. Expect me to quarrel with and challenge your assertions and arguments.

Sounds daunting, I imagine. Maybe it is. But work through your ideas and build an essay. (Notice the verb, engineers.) Once you've got a thesis idea, loads of evidence ready for use, and ideas aplenty, make an outline of some sort. Begin with the thesis if you make one for the argument itself, or begin with the opening ¶'s first sentence. But make an outline. Make a structure to hang those ideas of yours on. A tailor uses a pattern, an architect a blueprint. A writer uses an outline.

Dickens did this:

Dombey is the first Dickens novel for which there exists a complete set of preparatory notes for each monthly number (an isolated set, quoted above, exists for *Chuzzlewit* IV), a working practice Dickens followed for all his subsequent novels in this format, as well as for *Hard Times* which was published as a weekly serial but planned in five monthly numbers.

For each number he prepared a sheet of paper approximately 7 x 9 inches by turning it sideways, with the long side horizontal, dividing it in two, and then using the left-hand side for what he called "Mems." These were memoranda to himself about events and scenes that might feature in the number, directions as to the pace of the narrative, particular phrases he wanted to work in, questions to himself about whether such-and-such a character should appear in this number or be kept waiting in the wings (usually with some such answer as "Yes," "No," or "Not yet" added later) — in short, what has been succinctly described as "brief aids in decision making, planning and remembering." Among the "General mems for No 3," for example, we find that wonderful image for little Paul's desolation at Mrs. Pipchin's, "— as if he had taken life: [*sic*] unfurnished, and the upholster were never coming" … and "Be patient with Carker — Get him on very slowly, without incident" (*DS* XII).

On the right hand side of the sheet Dickens would generally write the numbers and titles of the three chapters that make up each monthly part and jot down, either before or after writing them, the names of the main characters and events featuring in each chapter. with occasionally a crucial fragment of the dialogue like little Paul's "Papa what's money?" in chapter 8 [of *Dombey and Son*], or a note of significant events like "Death's warning to Mrs Skewton" in chapter 36.

— Slater, Michael. *Charles Dickens: A Life Defined by Writing*. New Haven: Yale UP, 2009. Print. 258-69.

The great non-fiction writer John McPhee does this. A key excerpt:

The approach to structure in factual writing is like returning from a grocery store with materials you intend to cook for dinner. You set them out on the kitchen counter, and what's there is what you deal with, and all you deal with. If something is red and globular, you don't call it a tomato if it's a bell pepper. To some extent, the structure of a composition dictates itself, and to some extent it does not. Where you have a free hand, you can make interesting choices.

Works Cited

Baker, Geoff. *How to Write a Research Paper in Literature*. CSU Chico. Web. 20 November 2013. I've borrowed structure, ideas, phrases, and sentences.