

C205 Classical Mythology

Hints for writing, proofreading, and editing papers for C205

Thesis and organization

(1) Every microtheme that you write for this class must have a **thesis**, and that thesis must be strongly and clearly stated in the first paragraph. (If you cannot sum up the major argument of your paper in a sentence or two, chances are you don't have one). A good thesis engages the reader and makes her/him want to keep reading. A useful rule of thumb is to avoid any thesis statement that is so obvious, broadly worded, or vague that it cannot possibly be disagreed with. For example, "William Butler Yeats's poem 'Leda and the Swan' contains many paradoxes and contradictions" is not a very compelling thesis, because virtually any work of poetry contains paradoxes and contradictions. Try instead to find something more specific that answers a "why" question (Why does the author use images of contradiction?) or a "how" question (How does the author use contradiction and paradox to manipulate his reader's emotions or to increase his reader's understanding of the situation?). Example: "In 'Leda and the Swan,' through his use of contradictory and paradoxical images to describe the rape of Leda by Zeus, William Butler Yeats demonstrates both the benefits and the dangers of divine intervention in human affairs." Or: "In his poem 'Leda and the Swan,' William Butler Yeats employs paradoxical imagery to show how historical progress depends upon acts of violence of destruction."

(2) Ideally, each paragraph of your paper -- as well as the essay as a whole -- should have a thesis. That is, you should be able to state in a sentence or two the main point that a given paragraph is trying to make. Once again, if you cannot say what a paragraph is about, your reader will almost certainly be confused. Try writing down, using as few words as possible, the main idea of each paragraph. Do the ideas in each paragraph follow one another in a logical progression, or might there be another way to arrange your paragraphs? Is your essay's organizational structure clear, logical, and easy to outline?

Using examples and evidence

(3) Every assertion that you make, whether of opinion or of fact, must be supported by examples and evidence from the literary text(s) you are discussing. For example, if you wanted to argue that the swan in Yeats's poem "Leda and the Swan" represents darkness and destruction, you could point to lines such as "dark webs" and "brute blood" to support your assertion. Be careful to take into account rather than ignore evidence that contradicts or complicates your argument: for instance, what do you make of the fact that Yeats's swan is also described in much more positive terms, as a "feathered glory"?). A complex argument is always more interesting (and often more convincing) than a simplistic, narrowly focused one.

Mechanics and style

(4) Spelling: Always run your spellcheck! Misspellings in the computer age are absolutely inexcusable. Next, proofread manually for syntax errors and other typos. (For instance, if you typed "red" instead of "read," your spellcheck will not pick up the error). You will not find every mistake if you proofread directly on the computer screen; you must print out a hard copy. Remember, a paper full of typos sends the message that you didn't care enough about your essay to reread it yourself. In that case, your instructor will probably not care much about your paper (or your grade) either.

(5) Syntax: Proofread for clear, logical syntax. Are any sentences so convoluted that they become difficult to follow? Does every verb agree with its subject? In general, if subject and verb are separated by more than about half a dozen words, your sentence will probably be confusing. Example: "This sentence, like all the others in this essay, which is full of parenthetical phrases like this one as well as lots and lots of prepositions on top of all of the other confusing grammatical elements and unnecessary repetitions, is very hard to follow."

(6) Vocabulary: Do you use any unusual or supposedly intellectual-sounding words about whose meaning you are not absolutely certain? If so, look them up in a good dictionary. Example: "This poem personifies the myriad of conflicts inferred by the author." Lots of big words here, but they're all used incorrectly, which ultimately ends up making the writer look pretentious rather than clever.

(7) Verb tenses: The general rule is to use the present tense whenever you're discussing the content of a literary text (the idea being, presumably, that literature stands outside of time) but the past tense when you're discussing historical events. This distinction can get tricky at times, but you should stick to it as well as you can. Example: "William Butler Yeats **wrote** "Leda and the Swan" in 1923, just a few years after the First World War. The poem **describes** the rape of Leda, the Queen of Sparta, by Zeus, a god disguised as a swan. In the poem, Yeats **writes** that . . ." For most microthemes, you will be writing entirely in the present tense.

(8) Crutch words: Here is a simple revisionary process that will improve the writing of virtually everyone in the class. Print out a hard copy of your paper; then go through and circle every occurrence of the following words: **it**, **that**, **this**, and **these**. (Alternatively, you can find them on your word processor using a search command). Do you use any of these words too often (i.e., more than once in a single sentence or more than two or three times in a paragraph)? If so, try to think up some alternate wordings. Be especially careful with **this**; only use if you are absolutely sure what your antecedent is (i.e., what does "this" refer to?). Example of a fuzzy **this**: "'Leda and the Swan' has often been described as a political allegory. This demonstrates that Yeats was interested in the Leda myth's implications for twentieth-century society."

(9) Passive verb constructions: Also circle (or run a search for) all forms of be in your paper: **is**, **was**, **were**, **are**, **be**, etc. If you use passive verbs more than once or twice in a single sentence, or more than two or three times in a paragraph, you need to replace some of them with more active verbs. Examples of sentences to avoid: "Leda **is being** attacked by the swan. She **is** frightened and confused. Help **is** nowhere to **be** found." Or: "From **this it is** evident **that this** poem **is** about issues **that are** important to Yeats."

(10) Integrating quotations: All quotations should fit the syntax of your sentence. Commas and periods go inside quotation marks even if they were not in the original quote; all other punctuation marks (semicolons, question marks, etc.) go outside quotation marks unless they are part of the quote itself. Page or line number citations belong outside quotation marks but before other punctuation. Examples:

- Yeats presents a political allegory in "Leda and the Swan."
- Yeats presents a political allegory in "Leda and the Swan" (p.3).
- How does Yeats present a political allegory in "Leda and the Swan"?
- The poem begins with a "sudden blow"; however, Yeats immediately undercuts the violence of the opening line when he describes the swan's wings as "beating still," since "still" suggests peace and silence as well as temporal continuity.