

Bibliographic Essay – due 3/19/08

THE BROADER CONTEXT

Rhetorical theorist Kenneth Burke often spoke about academic discourse as “a conversation” that began long before we even started thinking about it. This is how he describes it:

Imagine that you enter a parlor. You come late. When you arrive, others have long preceded you, and they are engaged in a heated discussion ... In fact, the discussion had already begun long before any of them got there, so that no one present is qualified to retrace for you all the steps that had gone before. You listen for a while, until you decide that you have caught the tenor of the argument; then you put in your oar. Someone answers; you answer him; another comes to your defense; another aligns himself against you. ... The hour grows late, you must depart. And you do depart, with the discussion still vigorously in progress. (*The Philosophy of Literary Form* 110-11)

Burke’s image is important to field writing and research because it reminds us that when we use archival sources we are essentially bringing them into discussion with each other and with our observations in specific ways and on specific points. It also reminds us that, for our observations to be accepted as reliable and unique, we must sometimes position them within conversations that are already established.

THE ASSIGNMENT

Based on the careful searching you do for archival sources related to your issue, select **five to seven (5-7) academic articles** and write a bibliographic essay in which you synthesize the articles and show on which points they are related. A bibliographic essay typically examines the literature on a particular topic, but it does more than just present disconnected summaries of that literature. Rather, it puts different articles into close conversation with one another and with an issue by making an interpretive claim of its own.

CHARACTERISTICS AND EVALUATION CRITERIA

This assignment is worth **150 points**. The following major characteristics will guide my evaluation:

Appropriateness of Sources

As a field writer and researcher, you are doing more than just reporting facts or proving your own assumptions, so “appropriateness” means more than just “is it factual?” or “does it agree with you?” or “does it represent one side of an argument?” The sources you choose should be credible, reliable, and rich enough to help you uncover new facets of your issue. For this essay, I’m asking you to select only academic texts. By “academic,” I mean authored articles that have been written based on some form of inquiry, that forward some kind of argument, and that represent a fairly multivocal discussion of a topic. Articles from scholarly journals, chapters from scholarly books, and articles from professional or trade journals would meet these criteria. Associated Press wire reports, editorials, organizational web sites, popular magazines, and encyclopedia entries most likely would not—either because they don’t present substantial conversation on an issue, or because their conversation is too one-sided. Diversify your sources so that you aren’t stuck in a single perspective or point of view.

Purpose & Argument

The way you choose to relate these sources should support your “interpretive claim.” Unlike other forms of arguments, “interpretive claims” *don’t* require that you take a stance on your issue; they *do* require that you demonstrate what new aspects of your issue the sources allowed you to discover. Look for the dissonances between articles on particular points or concepts. You might find that some articles disagree with one another on the same point, or that one article presents a more in-depth solution to something that another article only introduces as a problem. You might find that some articles discuss the same side of an

issue in different ways, or that some articles research the same problem using different methodologies, or that one article provides a fuller definition of another article's concept. Please be as accurate as possible in your interpretation so that you don't inadvertently misrepresent the articles' original arguments. Please also try to avoid value judgments as you consider how the articles develop your issue (e.g., "the most important study," "his hair-brained claim," "this obsolete argument," etc.).

Organization & Coherence

The way you organize this essay should also follow from your "interpretive claim"; choose the organization that makes most sense for demonstrating key relationships between the articles and your issue. This might be topical (point-by-point), chronological, thematic, or question-by-question. Consider which sources are best discussed together to develop these points, chronologies, questions, or themes. As always, your paragraphs should be strongly focused and well developed, with transitions to make them cohere. Consider how you can "thread" each section of the essay together, so that their main points work towards a conclusion that synthesizes to a new point.

Introduction

Your readers have no familiarity with this class or with your project, so the introduction for your bibliographic essay should provide them with some understanding of the broader research context. Consider how you can implicitly and interestingly discuss the relevance of your project, introduce us to your issue, and forecast the major relationships that you found between your sources.

Development & Scope

Your reader needs to get the sense that your "interpretive claim" has genuinely come from the sources you discuss, rather than the other way around. So, although you aren't writing distinct summaries of each article, you will still do a fair bit of summarizing and analyzing the sources that you use in order to best demonstrate the relationships between them. Consider the author's context and original intention with each article you discuss. Consider how the author's argument is constructed and organized, and what evidence is given to support his or her claims. Consider what makes the article particularly relevant to your issue, and what necessarily information it will provide, including specific terminology that should be defined. Whose "voices" or perspectives does it represent and what new questions does it raise? The way you summarize, paraphrase, or otherwise integrate quoted passages should make these relationships clear. If page length helps you get a sense of the essay's scope, then plan on **5-7 pages** plus a separate "Works Cited" page.

Language & Clarity: Your use of language and syntax should strengthen, not weaken, your work. Try to avoid value terms and other words that imply you have fallen into dichotomous thinking about your issue, and try to avoid excessive "metadiscourse" that takes the focus off of your discussion. Aim for grammatically clear, elegant sentences with no major patterns of error to interrupt your meaning. Be authentic by speaking through the sources you use, rather than relying too much on each author's language. Be sure to spell out any abbreviations or acronyms the first time you use them.

Discourse Conventions: Compose a title that engages your reader and reflects your "interpretive claim." Follow MLA citation style for both in-text citations and your "Works Cited" page (see "Appendix A" in our *Fieldworking* textbook or see the MLA Style links from our online course resources page). Every source mentioned in the essay should correspond with your Works Cited List and vice versa. Your bibliographic essay should be typed, double-spaced with 1" margins, in 11 or 12 pt. Times New Roman. Please put your name, course number, assignment name, and due date in the top left corner of the first page.

IMPORTANT DUE DATES

3/3/08 – bring 5-7 sources to class

3/5/08 – bring draft of introduction to class

3/19/08 – Bibliographic Essay due in class **with copies of all sources**