

Appendix A: Complete Instructions for Inquiry Papers and Responses

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Context: Writing at Evergreen

Each Evergreen program is unique. Beyond occasional suggestions that we should “teach writing across the curriculum,” faculty are on their own (with the expert help of the campus writing center) to assign and evaluate students’ written work. Anecdotal information leads me to think that many faculty assign some sort of writing based in assigned texts, and that students experience confusion in moving from one program’s expectations to the next. But I don’t know of cross-program standards for writing assignments or for assessing student writing performance. And while it is certainly possible that an informal “genre” of reading response papers exists in student lore and knowledge, I don’t know of research that addresses it.¹

This is of course not to say that students (or faculty) are somehow shielded from or unaffected by the expectations of what Patricia Bizzell calls “traditional academic discourse”: wielded by those most powerful, formally correct as to language use, reflecting “a typical worldview” (1-2). This worldview [. . .] speaks through an academic persona who is objective, trying to prevent any emotions or prejudices from influencing the ideas in the writing [. . .] skeptical, responding with doubt and questions to any claim that something is true or good or beautiful [. . .] argumentative, favoring debate [. . .] the persona extremely precise, exacting, rigorous [. . .] (2)

Knowledge from this perspective can result only from debate; it “is not immediately available to experience [. . .] if debate is going to generate knowledge, all participants must [. . .] argue logically and fairly, use sound evidence, and so on” (2). Faculty and students bring previous training with them when they come to Evergreen, may put it into practice while here, and understand that they may encounter traditional expectations again any time they venture into wider academia. In addition, faculty remain responsible for assessment (usually) and evaluation (always) even in collaborative learning community settings, a “power over” position that certainly affects students’ constructions of their writing environments and products.

In courses and programs I teach, my goal in assigning weekly informal writing about our texts is that students will do something that could be preparatory to what Bizzell describes, but that is not that in itself. I ask students to explore and open out their thinking, documenting it in ways that allow themselves, other students in the program and me as a program member and faculty, to understand it and respond. My expectation is that students will use and develop their skills in reading for meaning and in interpreting what they find, trying out (however briefly) positions more flexible than what Thomas Newkirk calls a “defensive attitude toward culture [and cultural discourses]” (96), and taking on tasks more complex than summary. As documented in the report of a previous SOTL project, I often teach the concept of “generative” questions intended to lead to divergent or exploratory knowledge making, and then expect students to write from and as part of this exploration in their work with texts before those texts are discussed in seminar (Sandoz *Project Appendix 4* 15-18). This approach generally results in writing products quite different from the formal five-paragraph essay students may have previously learned.

¹ In collaborative knowledge making in particular, given the direct presence of the social, a student may draw from standards or images of the learner/scholar – the worker in academic settings – prevalent in whatever s/he perceives to be the relevant epistemic community (the specific program or course, Evergreen, college in general) or from paradigms learned in past experience in other knowledge communities (high school, another college, a job, a religious tradition or organization, etc.) My assumption is that the learner/self presented in papers is crafted to match a perceived expectation, with at least some degree of intent. Additional research would be necessary to discover what those perceived expectations are.

WEEKLY PAPERS [Class Handout]

Weekly papers should be "writing to learn" -- that is, writing that allows you to explore aspects of the reading that interest you. They should be more than summaries of the readings; at the very least, connect the dots (the facts about what was in the reading) with some sort of link you see between them. Draw a larger picture! We welcome creativity. Do meet the assignment criteria below, and please work toward clarity in all of your writing this quarter. We suggest you try the SEE + I format during the first couple of weeks, to get started. Or, if you've had some training in formal analysis, you may want to work with the elements of art or literary prose or poetry. (We'll be teaching some basics of these approaches during weeks 3 and 4.) The MOST IMPORTANT measures of your writing are how seriously you take it, how interested you are in it, and what you -- and the rest of us -- learn from it. Making knowledge is a collaborative effort!

FACULTY FEEDBACK WILL BE BASED ON:

Assignment Criteria

- Is the paper substantive (more than summary) and relevant to program themes?
- Does the paper communicate clearly the writer's ideas, interpretations of the readings?
- Does the paper end with three to five *generative* open-ended questions, based in the writer's thinking about the readings for the week?
- Mechanics: Was the paper posted by the due date? Is the paper 550-770 words in length? Is anything in the paper that is not the writer's own work (ideas, information, etc.) paraphrased (completely rewritten) and cited with page numbers and in MLA style? Are direct quotations enclosed in quote marks, and the source cited?

Emphasis on Clarity

Purpose: Communicating clearly to your readers, so that they can fully understand ("see") what you've said. Happily, research shows that clear communication to others also deepens the communicator's personal learning.

The Clarity SEE + I²: A (Strongly) Suggested Paper Format Early in the Quarter

1. **State:** Write a sentence or a few sentences about what you're going to write about -- maybe a key point (or two) in this week's readings, a connection you see between these readings or between the readings and something we did in class, an idea the readings sparked for you in relation to our on-going work, etc.
2. **Elaborate:** Flesh out what you've stated, by describing implications, providing particulars, and so on. This is an important part of the paper; if you aren't sure how clear it is, try reading it aloud to yourself to get a little distance from it, or getting someone to give you some feedback.
3. **Exemplify:** Write about a particular example of your point . . . an artwork in one of the readings for this or previous weeks, an artist or character in one of the readings, a particular passage in a reading (or passages in several readings), etc. The point here is to make clear how this example relates to your point.
4. **Illustrate:** If you have a hunch this will help to communicate your ideas more clearly, add an illustration -- a drawing, graph, metaphor, etc.

² This section is based in Broadbear, James T. "Essential Elements of Lessons Designed to Promote Critical Thinking," *Journal of Scholarship of Teaching and Learning* (JoSoTL), 3:3 (2003): 1-8. Retrieved January 5, 2005 from http://titans.iusb.edu/josotl/VOL_3/NO_3/broadbear.pdf. Broadbear calls this suggested structure, which he attributes to Paul and Elder in their book *Critical Thinking: Tools for Taking Charge of Your Learning and Your Life*, "the SEE technique" (4), and focuses on it as an assessment tool.

Responding to Another Reading Circle Member's Paper *[Class handout]*

The Response Three-Step

- 1) Support the writer!
- 2) Go beyond support, into clarity.
- 3) Do one thing to help open out the paper's content.

1) Feel free to support the writer! Comments about time and effort taken to create a good solid paper, about thoughtful work, and so on, are always appreciated (especially when genuinely meant).

2) Go beyond support, into clarity. Speak from your own experience as one reader. You are uniquely qualified to do this! Give the writer the gift of knowing how another person understood her/his words.

a) What did you understand or learn from the paper? Write a sentence or two here. Restatement is fine – you don't have to write about the effect of this understanding on you unless you want to.

b) How was the paper in terms of clear communication, in your opinion? Did the writer use both detail and generalization? Comment on this in a sentence or two.

c) Identify one to two (not more) specific sentences or paragraphs that confused or interested or taught you. Avoid judgment (positive or negative). Don't be anxious about this – supportively stated, noncompetitive feedback on thinking and writing is rare and precious, and contributes to everyone's learning.

3) Do one thing to help open out the paper's content. You might

- Link it to one or more of the Thursday readings.
- Comment on how one of the paper writer's main ideas connects to one of the artworks we've studied.
- Apply one of the paper writer's ideas to a hypothetical or actual situation.
- Add to one or more of the paper writer's points.
- Explore ethical/moral implications of writer's material. (Note – This is easiest to do by applying implications you see to a specific idea or artwork. Be sure to link your work here to the paper writer's work.)
- Synthesize your (responder's) and paper writer's observations/ideas. This may result in a third idea.
- Move material from the paper up or down S. I. Hayakawa's ladder of abstraction.
- Draw a conclusion based in the paper writer's work.
- Do something else!

Don't! Don't comment on the paper writer's spelling or grammar, or other technical aspects of her/his writing – unless the writer asks for that. Weekly papers posted are medium-stakes writing to learn, not a finished product.

Example of a Paper Written Using the See + I Format

[Class handout]

Source Citations

- Emanuel, Lynn. "The Planet Krypton." *The Dig: Poems*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1992. 4-5.
- Peterson, Brenda. "Growing Up Game." *Living By Water: Essays on Life, Land and Spirit*. Anchorage: Alaska Northwest Books, 1990. 7-11.
- Williams, Terry Tempest. "Clan of the One-Breasted Women." *Refuge: An Unnatural History of Family and Place*. New York: Vintage; Reprint edition, 1992. 281-290.

State

Both of these pieces (Peterson and Emanuel) seemed to be written as alternatives, or maybe questions, to the Hisland myth of the West.³

Elaborate

The part of the myth I mean is the idea that violence is a necessary or inescapable part of life, and that it is OK to use it to get what you want. We saw in . . . [I might go on to talk about this aspect of the myth a bit more, drawing from the film I watched in class for a bit more info].

Exemplify

In "Growing Up Game," Peterson writes about her relationship to hunting and eating animals. She grew up in a Forest Service family, and her father hunted (8-9). But her father also taught her that animals are related to humans – that all of us are "brothers and sisters" (9). Animals give their lives to humans to feed us, and as a result we "become the spirit and body of animals we eat" (9). This is very different from killing without thinking, or for fun! And Peterson says that having this attitude has taught her something important – that because she thinks about the fact that she eats food that once was alive, she knows that she will die. She says this knowledge is "uneasy" (10). But she doesn't run away from that knowing. I sometimes think that all the violence in the myth is a running away from the truth that we are all mortal.

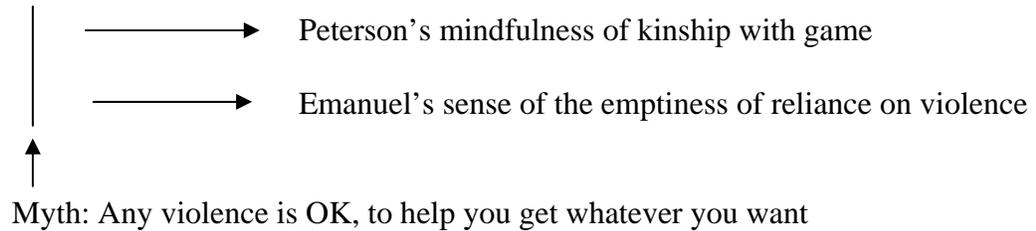
"The Planet Krypton" was harder for me to understand, so what I think about it may change. But when I made a chart of the images Emanuel uses to talk about the bomb, I began to comprehend that she's saying something about finding "possibility/uncorked" in the sound of the bomb going off (lines 23-24) because the bomb seemed sophisticated, somehow. (She writes about "the suave, brilliant wattage of the bomb," line 22, and about the possibility being "Taffeta wraps whispered on davenport," line 24, which I think is about people waiting in a living room to go out to a party.) The reason I think she's criticizing the bomb and this sense of possibility people find in it is because she also described the bomb as something like a snake – "silky, hooded, glittering, uncoiling length (line 12). So she's thinking about the atom bomb, and the violence it represents, at least as both threatening (the snake) and positive (possibility). The possibility seems empty, though, if all the bomb and its violence brings is the chance to go to a party. And that questions the myth's assumption that all violence is necessary and important.

(more on back!)

³ As far as I know, Susan Armitage introduced this term in 1983. In a subsequent book Armitage edited with Elizabeth Jameson, "Hisland" is characterized as "a mythic place perpetuated in western history texts and survey courses, where seldom was heard a discouraging word, and never a woman's voice" (3). Armitage, Susan and Elizabeth Jameson, eds. "Editor's Introduction." *Writing the Range: Race, Class, and Culture in the Women's West*. Norman: University of Oklahoma P, 1997.

Illustration

You could put a simple table here of images Emanuel uses in her poem. Or a diagram of the relationship between the ideas in these readings and the myth – something like:



Generative Questions

I'm wondering if what Williams writes of in "Clan" is a response to what Peterson talks about in "Growing Up Game." Peterson says she knows we are "lean and lovely and mortal" (11) but stops with that knowledge. Williams gets involved in activism. What drove Williams on to that, beyond the facts of all the cancer in her family (which she'd already known about for years)? Why do people like Williams go against religion and upbringing to become public protestors?

All of these readings seem to have "land" (including animals) in them in one way or another. Are there similarities between what the authors say about land? How do their representations of land in these writings respond to ideas about land in the "Hisland" myth we've talked about in class?

The writers of the readings are all women. What do the readings say about women's experience, specifically, in the West? I was really interested in the way Williams brought pregnancy and the land together, at the top of page 288, for example. What does she want us to understand, when she compares labor pains and birth to the underground nuclear explosions?