

English 467

Possible Essay Topics

Getting Started

1. Read through all of the paper topics and spend some time planning a response to more than one. In other words, “try the topic on” to see how it fits. If you have to choose a text consider what texts would you focus on. How do these texts fit the topic? What are some of the complications that might arise from the use of this text, bearing in mind that complications can often be a source of the greatest interest for writer and reader?
2. Once you have selected a topic and the text or texts that will be your focus, spend some time with those texts. Reread them with the new perspective of the paper you plan to write. Be careful, though, not to simply reread them to find evidence to support your position. Instead be open to the possibility that you might find both confirming and contradictory evidence. Don’t dismiss the contradictory evidence. Keep track of it.
3. Look through your notes on the topic and the text(s) and develop a preliminary thesis.
4. Write a draft (or drafts) of your paper. Find someone in class willing to look at your essay (offer to look at his or her in return). Be careful about relying on friends—you want good feedback that will help you revise your paper and make it better; you don’t want friendly comments like “It looks pretty good to me.” You can also visit the Writing Center at any stage of the process—when you are trying to find a topic, when you are developing possible responses to the topic, when you are developing a preliminary thesis, when you are drafting.
5. If you don’t wait until the last minute, you can even give me a draft to review. I won’t proofread the paper for you, restricting my comments to larger rhetorical issues like focus, development, argument and so on.
6. Be sure to proofread your essays carefully, and consider giving your paper to a friend or classmate for proofreading. Also read your paper out loud to yourself before completing a final draft—make sure it sounds like spoken English and not like paper-ese. Try for an easy, graceful, but not overly casual writing style; assume a reader who knows the text, but has not memorized every detail.

Note: If you are a graduate student taking this course as part of your graduate program, you can choose to write on one of the topics below or you can see me about working on a topic of your own. Graduate students are expected to produce longer papers (7-10 pages) that incorporate some secondary materials (criticism, biography, history, theory, etc.).

Paper Topics

Essays written in response to the topics below should be 4-6 pages in length and formatted according to standard MLA conventions (see the syllabus for more on formatting written work for this class). The use of secondary materials is neither expected nor encouraged.

1. Write an essay in which you examine a single literary text using the concept of the sublime (as defined by Kant). While most responses to this topic will focus on literary texts that attempt to represent the experience of the sublime, you might choose a text that self-consciously undercuts the sublime.
2. The French Revolution was of course a real event that historians tell us began with the storming of the Bastille on July 14, 1789. Almost immediately, though, the French Revolution became much more than an historical event; it became a way of thinking about the world. With its simple oppositions between absolutist monarchy and democracy, tyranny and freedom, oppression and liberty, the language of revolution can be found in virtually every text published in Great Britain in the years immediately following 1789. Focusing on a single literary text, examine how our awareness and understanding of the language of revolution can be used to interpret the text. Please note that you are not limited in your discussion to texts that explicitly refer to the French Revolution.
3. One of the sources of the name we give to this historical period and this course is the literary form “romance.” To many of the writers of the Romantic era, however, romance is less a literary genre than a desire to imagine a world outside of or opposed to the everyday world of what Wordsworth calls “getting and spending” (see his sonnet “The World Is Too Much with Us”). Focusing on a single literary text, examine how these worlds outside of or opposed to the everyday world are represented in the text and what those representations suggest about the writer’s attitude towards romance.
4. Many writers of the Romantic era struggle with the idea of individual autonomy, specifically in the form of the larger-than-life figure who is independent of the rules governing the conduct of common people. These celebrations of individuality, though, frequently contain as well their own critique of the dangers of it. Write an essay examining the problematic nature of individuality as explored in one of the texts we have studied this quarter.
5. As a final alternative, you may write an essay on a topic of your choice, provided that you submit to me a proposal for your paper (see below). The proposal is a short (less than one page) description of your term paper. It provides a preliminary thesis, the texts you plan to discuss, and any questions or concerns that you have at present about your project. Please submit your prospectus by email to jgarret@calstatela.edu. I will respond by email.