

Essay Assignment - Fall 2002 - The English Language

Bibl. & Abstracts 11/12

Rough Draft 11/19

Final Revision 12/3

A 7-10 page discussion of a theoretical issue raised by a critical text; you will make an argument about how the concept applies, to supports, or is refuted by a found or literary example. As the culminating assignment for the semester, your essay should demonstrate knowledge of at least two related critical readings (preferably within the same section of the Routledge). It should draw upon at least two additional, academic sources (such as critical articles, entries in the Johns Hopkins or Xrefer/Oxford Encyclopedia databases, or other resources suggested by the bibliographies in Routledge; note that ProjectMuse, JSTOR, and other valuable electronic databases are most easily accessible from the UTPB library.) You may choose either of two options.

Option 1:

to explore the application of key concepts (from Routledge) to a literary text or to another example of language use (eg. using transcripts, interviews, movie or tv dialogue, etc.).

- ❑ this option requires that you take apply a concept in discussing a chosen text; you will need to show understanding of both the critical text (from Routledge) and the example text; you will also need to employ at least two additional class readings in your discussion;
- ❑ ex. An essay might take up the issue of Language in History, particularly Spitzer's claims about the process of linguistic innovation; the general elements he defines would be applied to a "studyable" contemporary example and tested; the essay would conclude that ultimately Spitzer discounts the effects of powerful interests, per Voloshinov, and so does not fully account for the contemporary example.

Option 2:

to explore the divergent perspective on a key issue, concept, or topic in the Routledge essays within a given section.

- ❑ this option requires thorough investigation of a central concept, by means of reading all the critical essays in the appropriate section of the Routledge. Ultimately it may take the side of one key essay and argue the failings of others; or it may try to synthesize key aspects of several articles in order to assert an "original" thesis about the topic.
 - ❑ ex. An essay on language and subjectivity might explore the question of whether the structure of language, which apparently works at an unconscious as well as conscious level is something the individual can ever gain control of (according to Lacan, Freud, Whorf, etc.).
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Caution - This is **not** an occasion for you to simply reiterate what you have learned in class about a particular text; you should brainstorm and develop a unique and persuasive essay reflecting your personal insights into the text(s). Regurgitated class notes and content summaries make equally unrewarding reading for the professor who must grade them.

Essays must be submitted on time, at the start of class; late essays will be accepted but with a letter-grade penalty per day. Students who have completed the assignment but cannot submit it in person should send it through a 'trustworthy emissary' or email it (and then also bring a hard copy to the next class). I will not accept an essay without both a rough draft and at least one revision. We will spend some class-time doing peer revision. I encourage you to seek me out during office hours, solicit a classmate's feedback, and make an appointment at the Writing Center. You must labor to produce improvements in your first draft, even if you believe it is nearly perfect. The four-part grading rubric means that Content, Organization, Mechanics, and Revision are each worth 25%—so a brilliant, well-organized, mechanically perfect essay with no revision earns a C.

What should my bibliography look like? I ask that you credit all sources (quoted, paraphrased, or summarized material) using **MLA Parenthetical Citation**. This means the author and page will be noted in the body of your essay (Author 1). And full publication information will appear at the paper's end. Information on this method is available in the library (see MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers), in most composition text books, and at www.mla.org. You may also seek guidance from the UTPB Writing Center.

What is an abstract? An abstract summarizes the argument of a book or essay. It does not extend, criticize or enter into argument with its subject but represents it in highly compressed but accurate form. In practice, research often involves the consultation of bibliographies that contain abstracts (e.g. Dissertation Abstracts); by reading the abstract, one can determine whether a particular book or essay pertains to one's research—a compromise between guessing on the basis of its title and actually reading the whole essay. In developing your term essay, you will identify relevant sources and write abstracts of them in concise paragraphs of about 100 words.

Development of a Sample Topic (No you can't copy it!)

Let's say I am interested in the broad area of Language and Gender. I reread the essays in the relevant section of the Routledge. I am particularly interested in Lakoff's idea that certain kinds of language use are impermissible to women (assertive language) but other more passive uses (tag questions) are welcomed; and that these unwritten rules for 'feminine' language use have consequences for women's freedom to achieve in the world.

I then look at Anzaldúa to see whether she analyzes or communicates experiences of facing gendered language rules. I choose to focus on the passage (76-77) where Anzaldúa explains about first hearing the word *nosotras* (feminine "we", we-women), a word which she had not known existed. I realize I can use Whorf to discuss the significance of her lacking such a word and that Irigaray's idea about the necessity for women to write as women will also be relevant.

Working Introduction - For Gloria Anzaldúa, the 'borderlands' of southern Texas composes a geographical, cultural, and psychological zone of conflict. Her decision to write *Borderlands/La Frontera* purely in English has been interpreted as a powerful assertion of her Mexican heritage. Yet as Robin Lakoff has shown, issues of language use and power involve more than the cultural conflict but also the voice which is allowed a women, a Chicana. At the level of language, Anzaldúa's use of code-switching not only validates her cultural identity but also liberates her from the constraint of talking (or remaining silent) like a lady.