



Cornell University

John S. Knight Institute for Writing in the Disciplines

Document Title: Specificity of Language; Writing an Abstract; Thesis Proposal and Group Review

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Course: English 158

Course Title: American Literature and Culture: Capes and Capers—The Anti-Hero in American Literature and Film

Year of Award: Fall 2007

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winner

Fall 2007 Knight Award for Writing Exercises and Handouts

The Knight Award for Writing Exercises recognizes excellence in short exercises and/or handouts designed to improve student writing. Appropriate topics may be drawn from the whole range of writing issues, large scale to small scale, such as development of theses, use of primary sources, organization of evidence, awareness of audience, attention to sentence patterns (e.g., passive/active voice; coordination/subordination), attention to diction, uses of punctuation, attention to mechanics (e.g., manuscript formats, apostrophes). Exercises and handouts may be developed for use in and/or out of class.

Submissions should comprise three parts: (1) A copy of the handouts or instructions that go to students. (2) An explanation of the exercise/ handout and of the principles behind it addressed to future instructors who may use the material. (3) If possible, an example of a student response.

Submissions may range in length from one to four or five pages.

Winning Writing Exercises and Handouts will often be included in the course packet for Writing 700 and will be posted on the Knight Institute website.

The two winning entries will receive \$350; honorable mentions (if any) will receive \$125.

Submissions are due in 101 McGraw Hall by Friday, December 7. No exceptions can be made.

Fall 2007 Knight Award for Writing Exercises

~Please Print Clearly~

Instructor's name Dana Koster

Department Eng. Course # and title 158.04 (Capes & Capers: the Antihero in American Literature & Film)

Should I win a prize, I give the John S. Knight Institute permission to publish, quote from, and/or distribute copies of my writing exercise, and to distribute publicity to newspapers and other publications, local and/or national, about my winning the prize. I am also prepared to send electronic versions of my text to the Knight Institute (knight_institute@cornell.edu). I will receive the award for my prize-winning exercise upon submission of the electronic text.

Specificity of Language, Writing an Abstract, Thesis Proposal and Group Review
Title of Writing Exercises

Instructor's signature  Date 12/6/07

Specificity of Language Exercise

English 158.04 Fall 2007

Specificity is an essential component of good writing, be it creative, professional or academic. Specific language is rich language: it expresses the writer's original voice through active verbs, vivid adjectives and detailed descriptions.

I usually advocate concision, but for this exercise I want you to go over-the-top. The sentences that follow are brief and imprecise and it is your job to make them more exact, more vibrant and more intriguing. Keeping intact the general idea, rewrite these fragments in your own unique way. Be prepared to share your work with the class.

Example: She ordered a dessert.

Revision: "I'll have the cheesecake," she whispered in a husky, breathless voice.

1. The movie was not good.
2. He needed a drink.
3. They are in love.
4. That was a bad idea.
5. He sings badly.
6. She entered the room.
7. This is delicious.
8. You look ridiculous.

Specificity of Language Rationale
English 158.04 Fall 2007

I designed this exercise to help students become more specific in their descriptions. As I said in the handout, I generally advocate concision in essays, but it's useful for students to practice the opposite, as well, especially considering how vague some papers can be. Students should get to the point in their essays and avoid repeating ideas, but they should also write clearly and engage the reader.

In writing the seven essays required for this course, the students can become dispassionate, which is usually accompanied by a drop in their productivity. I try to vary the take-home assignments (a few essays on film, a few on literature, at least one creative project, etc.) to challenge them, but I also introduce assignments such as this one in the classroom to engage them in-class and beyond.

The Specificity of Language handout tends to be fun for the students. I have them fill out the handout in class and then we go around in a circle reading our revised sentences to the group. It gives students an opportunity to do creative writing while also connecting back to their academic work. Ideally, it teaches them to avoid vague language and to look at essay writing a little differently.

Writing An Abstract
English 158.04 Fall 2007

An abstract is a brief synopsis of an essay, article, review or report. It is often used on theses, dissertations and academic papers to give the reader a digestible and immediate understanding of a paper's objectives. When choosing presenters at a conference or symposium, many organizations base their decisions on abstracts alone.

For class today, we read Roger Ebert's article "The Good, the Bad and the Ugly" (2003) on Leone's film of the same name. Take out your copy of Ebert's essay and underline his thesis, his most important points, and at least two significant pieces of evidence that support these points. As a group, we will use this information to create a rough abstract of Ebert's article on the board.

Useful Tips

When writing an abstract, be sure to....

1. Identify the title of the essay.
2. Quickly summarize the main purpose of the paper.
3. Present only the most important pieces of evidence and/or crucial statistics.
4. Phrase the abstract in a professional and succinct manner.
5. Keep it short. This should read as a super condensed version of the essay.

Abstract Handout Rationale
English 158.04 Fall 2007

Generally, my students tend to be biologists and engineers and not humanities majors. As someone who's teaching these students to write through essays on film and literature, I'm constantly searching for ways to make my assignments relevant and useful to those who won't continue on in my field. Oftentimes this means teaching them to craft a coherent argument, which is useful in any discipline, but at others it means designing assignments that help with other facets of academic writing.

For this particular segment of the class, we watched Sergio Leone's classic western *The Good, the Bad and the Ugly*. I paired this film with several articles, including a 2003 review by Roger Ebert. My ultimate objective was to create, as a group, an abstract of Ebert's article on the board. I thought this assignment would be of particular use to my students in the sciences.

To begin, I started a group discussion on abstracts, asking how many people had written one, what exactly an abstract was, etc. Next, I passed out my handout, which we read aloud, and elaborated on the importance of abstracts to both the sciences and humanities.

The handout asked the students to underline the essay's thesis, major points and most important pieces of evidence. After they had done this, we discussed what everyone had underlined and why.

Finally, I stood at the board and asked them to help me write a summary of the article. At times this meant exact phrasing, but mostly it entailed the students suggesting ideas, and my paraphrasing those ideas on the board.

Below is the abstract that we wrote together:

"In Roger Ebert's article 'The Good, the Bad and the Ugly,' he argues that bold cinematic techniques and the parody of classic westerns allow Leone's films to rise above other films of the time and become works of art. To prove this, he examines scenes such as the three-way standoff in the cemetery and the opening frames of the film. He also discusses the ways in which Leone uses framing to limit both what the audience and the characters see."

Unfortunately there wasn't room on the board to finish, but the students said that, given more space, they would add a few sentences on spaghetti westerns, Leone's timing and Ebert's obvious praise of the film. The students seemed extremely engaged with this exercise, and many of them took notes.

Essay Five Thesis Proposal
English 158.04 Fall 2007

You will choose your own essay topic for *The Maltese Falcon*. Your topic should be something that interests you, perhaps something derived from class discussion or your own journal entries. Whatever topic you choose, be sure it is clear, specific, arguable and complex. Don't leave your reader wondering "so what?"

As you get further into your college careers, professors will increasingly require you to formulate your own essay topics. This essay proposal gives you the chance to practice devising a topic of your own. You will also receive feedback on your ideas *before* you write the essay, which will allow you to rethink and reorganize your thoughts before you write your first draft.

Choosing a Topic

Read through the list of themes we drew up for *The Maltese Falcon* as well as your journal entries, and find a general topic that interests you. From there, think of one significant and intriguing question about that topic. That question is your crux.

Think about your question for a while: brainstorm, talk to your peers. When you think you have a persuasive answer, write it down as clearly and concisely as possible. That answer is your thesis.

Proposal Guidelines

1. At the top of the page, state your thesis in a sentence or two. Remember, your thesis *must be arguable*. It must go beyond observation.
2. In a paragraph, explain your general ideas for the essay. What do you plan on discussing? Why is your topic worth pursuing?
3. List five pieces of evidence (in the form of quotations and scenes) that support your thesis.

Please bring a copy of your proposal to class on Monday, October 29th.

Thesis Proposal Rationale
English 158.04 Fall 2007

In my mind, the most important part of learning to write is learning to make an argument. The thesis proposal comes towards the end of the semester, after the students have spent time crafting theses for four previous essays. On the assignments leading up to this one, the students only have to come up with a thesis, and not a crux – that is, they base their papers on my essay questions. For this, their fifth paper, I ask them to go one step further and come up with their own question, as well.

Because this is their first time coming up with their own topics, however, I've created certain parameters to make the assignment easier. Each week of the semester they must write a 250-500 word journal entry on the novel or film we're studying at that moment. These journals can be on any subject of interest to the student within the parameters of that novel or film, and as such they're often the kernels for later thesis proposals. I ask the students to read through their own journal entries and to look over the list of themes and motifs we covered in class discussion. Using those as a jumping off point, I ask them to come up with one good question: their crux. Once they've created their crux, they must brainstorm possible answers until they find the best one (defined as the most specific, arguable and complex). That's their thesis.

This exercise asks them to create more than just a thesis topic, however. Though I don't label it as such on the handout, the "Proposal Guidelines" ask them to create a rough outline of their paper. This includes a brief summary of what the proposed paper will cover as well as five pieces of evidence that support the thesis. By forcing the students to come up with multiple instances of evidence and what amounts to an abstract, I'm asking them to briefly test out the thesis statement to see if it works. This mini-outline is often helpful to peer reviewers, whose job it is to decide if the author's argument is feasible and complex enough to sustain an actual essay.

Thesis Proposal Group Review
English 158.04 Fall 2007

1. Identify the main weakness of the author's thesis proposal.
2. Identify the main strength in the author's thesis proposal.
3. Give your general opinion of the thesis statement, keeping in mind the following questions: Is the thesis clear? Is it arguable? Does it leave you asking *so what?*
4. State one counter argument to the author's thesis statement, however strong or weak it may be.

Your essay on *The Maltese Falcon* is due on Wednesday, November 7th at the beginning of class period. It should be 4-5 pages in length, double-spaced and in 12 point font. Please attach this peer review sheet and your thesis proposal to your final paper.

Group Review Rationale
English 158.04 Fall 2007

It is often easier for students to edit another's writing than it is their own. After I collected thesis proposals for *The Maltese Falcon* essay, I read through them at home and divided them all into four groups based on the general topic of the proposed essay and the viability of the thesis statement. Students were in groups both because their thesis topics were similar and because there was at least one student in each group with a strong proposal. These students worked as group leaders who guided everyone through the review sheets.

After splitting everyone into groups, I passed out the handout and instructed the students to read their thesis statements aloud to their peers. I then asked them to collaboratively answer the questions on the handout so that, at the end of the class period, each student would be able to take home a paper filled with constructive comments.

The questions on the sheet were designed to both encourage and insist on improvement. The most useful part of the sheet is question number four, which asks the group to come up with a counter argument to the author's thesis statement. The weakest proposals had no possible counter argument or one that was too convincing – and the students were best able to recognize a potential problem with a proposal, as a whole, when responding to this question.