

Objective

When we talk in class about the way our readings illuminate the human condition, we are acknowledging that literature is not disconnected and self-contained, but instead speaks directly to the world around us. The purpose of the Research & Reflection Essay is to dig deeper into the experience of the literature, to draw connections between what we read and what is real.

For this essay, you will choose one (or more) of the works that were assigned for class, and research ideas or issues raised by the literature—something you are interested in exploring further. This could be a plot element, a theme, the history or context of the work, the life of the writer, or anything else you wish—e.g., Virginia in the 1850s, explorations of race in poetry, the life and work of Dorianne Laux, or magical realism in short stories.

Think about which piece interests you the most, and why.

Next devise a research question, something you want to know, and seek out multiple outside sources to help answer it. These might include books, articles from the library databases, and credible web sites. (A credible source has a named author, whose credentials are explained; you should explain this credibility in your essay.) Sources should be more in-depth than a wiki entry.

As a result of this process, reflect again—on the work, on yourself, on the world we live in. Consider any relevant personal experiences. Consider how your research affects your reactions to the work. Ultimately you will arrive at some understanding, doubt, or other conclusion about the literature that goes beyond your initial reading—and that’s what the essay is about.

You should make connections between your research, your reflections, and the reading, but you may balance these elements in any way that makes sense to you. You should stay focused, support the claims you make, and organize your thoughts logically. You should explain your sources, quote from them when necessary, and cite all information or ideas that are not yours. Quote from the literature, as well, when necessary.

Apart from the abstract guidelines above, I do not have preconceived ideas about what this will look like, what it will be about, or what I “want” you to do. What I hope for is something interesting, something creative. What I hope is that you will keep thinking.

Format

5 pages minimum

3 sources minimum, in addition to any books assigned for class

Typed, double-spaced, 12 pt Times New Roman, 1” margins

MLA in-text citation style and MLA-style “Works Cited” page