

FINAL PAPER GUIDELINES

This assignment asks you to analyze a cultural artifact or social phenomenon related to gender, race, and ethnicity using theoretical tools inspired by class readings and discussions. In **7-8 pages** you are expected to engage with course materials (readings, lectures, class discussions, screenings, etc.) by way of an original and critically engaged response to one (or more) of the themes, ideas, and concepts covered. The purpose of the assignment is not to summarize or review—you can assume your reader (i.e. your instructor) has done the same reading you have. Rather, your objective is to **synthesize** the material you've chosen to focus on and use it to **critically reflect** on the cultural artifact or social phenomenon of your choice. *What have you been thinking about while reading, listening, watching, and discussing in class? How can course readings, concepts, and themes help you to better understand, analyze, and critique this particular artifact/phenomenon?*

You are free to write about whatever you like so long as your paper:

- (1) fits in with the course (i.e. engages with themes, concepts, and ideas central to the critical study of gender, ethnicity, and race in communication);
- (2) is a critical response to the various materials discussed class; and
- (3) is supported with evidence and an argument.

The openness of the assignment is part of the challenge. Having done the readings and actively listened and engaged in class, which key theme or idea in the course is important to you? And now, how are you now going to write about it?

You will be graded on your comprehension of the key arguments/themes/concepts from the readings/lectures that you choose to write about and on your expression of critical and analytical ideas in writing. Hand in on time an edited, correctly cited, grammatically correct, double spaced, properly margined, 12 point Times New Roman paper with your name on it. (I do not care which citation format you follow—e.g. MLA, APA, Chicago etc.—as long as it is consistent throughout).

Due via email: *December 20*****

All course participants will give a short, informal 5-minute presentation introducing their **research question, paper topic, argument**, and **findings** during the last day of class. Your job is simply to discuss your topic of choice, your general thesis/argument, and how your project connects to course themes. (Please note: Five minutes is not a lot of time, but neither is it an incredibly short amount of time. Please plan accordingly.)

Writing Tips:

Here are some preliminary tips for approaching the final paper:

- Please try to stick to using only course readings as theoretical evidence. This will ensure that you are adequately engaging with course concepts and themes. If you do need to draw on outside secondary research, that's totally fine. But outside materials should only *supplement* your engagement with course readings.
- Do not just provide a summary of readings or discussions, and please do not parrot the lectures. If you understand the material it will show in your writing. Defining keywords and concepts is both fine and important, but your understanding of a term or concept should become apparent through your use of it, not simply by way of definition.

- Try to include all appropriate terms/concepts that apply to what you have decided to write about, and don't be afraid to try out novel ways of combining terms and concepts that may not have been presented together in readings or lectures. "A-level" papers do not simply parrot readings and lectures; they necessarily take intellectual risks.
- All papers must make an argument. An argument is a claim that is supported with the most credible reasoning and evidence you can muster. You will likely want to state your argument right away in the first paragraph in the form of a thesis statement (e.g. "I argue that ..."). You may argue whatever you like so long as you provide adequate support for your thesis.
- Be focused and specific. You are not expected to have something to say about everything that has been covered, but you are expected to have something to say about particular themes, ideas, concepts, etc. It's fine to elaborate and even speculate, but only once you've clearly established your topic, your guiding question(s), and your argument(s). Remember: Every sentence counts.
- Please, please, please: Avoid using cliché and overly general statements such as "Since the beginning of time...." or "Inequality has always existed..."
- Don't just describe your chosen artifact; analyze it!
- Remember that being critical doesn't just mean criticize. So, the point isn't to explain why one of the authors we've read is a bad writer, stupid, or why s/he bored you silly. Nor is the point to explain why a particular object is bad, stupid, or boring. Criticisms can be part of an effective critical analysis, but being critical means asking challenging questions rather than just accepting ideas and arguments on face value. The aim of this paper is for you to be analytical and to engage both our course readings and our broader culture as a sophisticated thinker taking a Communication Studies course.

Suggested Steps for Writing a College-Level Paper

Writing a paper is a lot of work, and it should take a significant amount of time to complete. While staying up all night and writing a 7 or 8 page paper is a college tradition, I would not necessarily recommend doing so if you are actually trying to make a coherent argument (or get an "A"). Here are some suggested tips from a really helpful book called *The Craft of Research* (Wayne Booth, Gregory Colomb, and Joseph Williams. *The Craft of Research*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008). The book is available at Newman Library. *The Craft of Research* contains a ton of information to help you with each step of the writing process, and I highly suggest reading it. But, if you are in a pinch for time...

1. Figure out a **topic** that is appropriate to our class. In other words, what interests you in relation to our readings and conversations? The more specific you can get the better.
2. Now that you have a broad topic, you'll want to find an **appropriate object**. Your object and your topic should be "in conversation" with one another.
3. Now that you have a topic and an object, ask **questions** about this topic (i.e. brainstorm) and write them down until you get a question that seems really interesting to you and is not a dead end.
4. Figure out if this topic/question is **worth studying** by determining why it should matter to your readers. Ask yourself: "**So what?**" The task, then, is to figure out the relevance of your research topic/question to academic, social, economic, and/or political issues concerning gender, race, and ethnicity. If there is nothing to be gained from learning the answer to your question, you might want to find a new one.

At this point in the research process, you should now be able to identify:

- (a) the research topic (the idea that interests you);
- (b) the research object (what you're studying)
- (c) the research question (what about that idea and that object are you trying to learn);
- (d) the significance of your research question (why you are bothering to learn it).

5. Find some reliable, relevant **sources**. Which resources from our assignment reading will best help you answer this particular question?

6. Engage (i.e. **reread**) these sources in order to find evidence. Remember to take notes.

7. Construct an **argument that supports your answer to your question**. The first step is asking yourself: "What's my claim?" Think of your claim as your answer to your question or your solution to your problem. Put slightly differently, a claim is a sentence that asserts something that may be false and therefore needs support. Your argument is introduced in the form of a **thesis sentence** that usually appears near the end of the first paragraph of your paper.

An argument (thesis) usually takes this form of a sentence that begins with "I argue ..."

Your paper will have probably have more than one claim, but they will all relate back to this overarching thesis.

8. Figure out the reasons to **support** your claim(s) and back these reasons up with strong evidence. Your support should be drawn from your interpretation of *both* the object itself and course readings.

9. As you begin writing, acknowledge and respond to **anticipated questions and objections**. One way of thinking about this is to be prepared to entertain potential counterarguments.

10. As you write, be sure to justify the **relevance** of your reasons to your claim. For example, claiming that " $2+2=4$ " is surely correct, but who cares? Why does this even matter? Always ask yourself again (and again): Why are you writing this paper in the first place?

11. Complete a draft of the paper.

12. **Revise, revise, revise.** Revise your argument and rethink the paper's organizational structure. There is a very small chance that everything you write in your first draft is perfect, needs to be there, or even makes sense. This is totally normal and you should never feel bad about something you write in your first draft. This draft will be a first attempt at figuring out what arguments you can actually make and how you should order/arrange them to prove your claim.

A lot of times students hand in this first draft even though they have only figured out their real argument in the last paragraph of the paper. This will undoubtedly confuse your reader and read more like a diary of your research process than a real answer to a research question. Papers that read like a diary or stream-of-consciousness generally do not adequately answer a research question and therefore cannot achieve "A-level" work.

As you revise, you'll have better idea of what your main point is. Once you have a better idea of what your main point is, you'll be able to write a stronger **introduction** and a nice **conclusion**. Revise your style, too. Make sure your writing is clear and flows well. **I strongly recommend reading your paper aloud to yourself prior to submission.**

13. At some point (May 22) you will turn in a **final draft**. Don't think of the paper you turn in as the DEFINITIVE answer to a question. Writing is imperfect; we are human, we have deadlines, and finding a definitive answer doesn't actually happen that often. If you think about this final draft as *the* final answer you will have a very hard time ever turning your work in or getting anything done.

Happy writing!