By Raima Evan & Craig Williamson

with some revisions by Peter Schmidt

Swarthmore College, English Literature Department

**Outlines and Rough Drafts: Arguments and Evidence**

**I. Reading and Thinking**

1. If you like a text very much and think you might want to write your paper on it, use your reading process as fully as you can. Keep a pen handy while you are reading and take notes on the inside of the front cover of the book or along the margins of the text, or on a separate page. Underline passages as you read. Pay attention to certain themes or images that interest you. When you are finished reading the text, spend ten minutes jotting down your reactions to it while the impact is still fresh. Ask yourself what issues or ideas move you the most. What questions about the text strike you as most important? What problems does the text seem to pose? If you decide to write your paper on the text, it will be a lot easier to start if you have already taken these simple steps towards organizing your ideas. It will also help you remember the central issues of the text for classroom discussion and later use.

**II. Developing an Outline**

1. If you are having trouble coming up with an idea for a paper, go over the text and jot down things that interest you. Things you might write down are quotations, recurring themes, images, and metaphors. Also jot down things that surprise you or mystify you (think about why do this), things that produce a strong emotion in you, things that you can’t stop thinking about. Then go through your notes to see if there is one particular idea that you keep noticing and commenting on. This may well be the nucleus for your paper. Organizing your notes can help you develop your ideas and begin your outline.

2. Now you have a collection of notes. It’s time to put together your road map through your paper: your outline. Write down your thesis--even if it is just a phrase that will need to be developed or honed. Outlines don’t have to be fancy. Sketch out the different sections of your paper, which will help you, prove your point. Here is an example:

Rough Thesis Idea (which came up in class discussion): the episode of the Genie and the kidnapped bride in the opening section of the *Arabian Nights* can be interpreted in several different ways. 1. How the two Kings act, and how they interpret the events, give us insights into their characters and values; 2. The Genie’s actions reveal his character as well. In class we discussed how his motive for kidnapping and imprisoning the bride seem rather mysterious: the woman takes revenge by forcing many men to have sex with her, suggesting she may have been raped by the genie (?), yet when the genie wakes the only thing he demands is to sleep with his head in her lap—suggesting what?; 3. Do the bride’s actions and speech prove that women have monstrous appetites and must be controlled, or does this episode suggest a different possible interpretation of her situation? 4. Concluding issues, in the forms of questions to try to answer: How does this episode help us understand King Shahrayar’s later actions? Shahrazad isn’t “present” when this story is told to us, but could we speculate on how this kidnapping story is relevant to understanding Shahrazad’s own kind of decisive action?

As you flesh out your outline, refine your thesis idea or topic into a real thesis that you will try to prove. Do not start writing your rough draft until you have a thesis and an outline clearly formulated. If you start writing too soon, your paper will wander and become repetitive.

**III. Starting the Rough Draft**

**Your Thesis**

Your introductory paragraph should have two parts: a thesis statement and what we call a “method statement.” Your thesis states your argument; your method indicates how you will prove your argument. Sometimes your method can be indicated in one sentence, but often you may need several sentences. In your initial papers, please underline your thesis statement. For more info on how to craft a strong thesis, see the Getting a Good Thesis document.

**Transitions between paragraphs: The topic sentences**

Make sure your transitions from paragraph to paragraph are clear. By transitions, I mean the first one or two sentences at the beginning of each paragraph. Transitions serve three crucial purposes: 1) They help the reader understand the relation between the previous paragraph and the new one. 2) They hearken back to the thesis, reminding the reader of your argument as a whole. 3) They introduce the next point in your argument. All three of these functions are very important. For this reason, they are often spoken of as “topic sentences,” as they state the concern of the new paragraph. A good transition allows your argument to move gracefully, to flow from point to point. Sometimes a transition can be achieved by a word or phrase: “Similarly...” “On the other hand,...” More often, however, a transition requires a sentence or two. Transitions are particularly crucial when your thesis is complex, as they remind your reader of the thrust of your argument.

Good transitions normally don’t come happen in a paper’s first draft, but later, when you have a much stronger sense of how all the paper’s parts fit together and revise accordingly.

**Crafting your argument: What you put into your paragraphs**

Be selective. For a short paper, focus on two or three points and analyze them in detail (i.e., in depth, not superficially). Avoid quoting every passage or referring to every symbol that supports your argument.

Comment upon the quotations that you insert into your text. Demonstrate how they support your argument. Pick quotations that allow you to exercise your interpretive powers. If you have nothing much to say about a quotation--the imagery, the language, the assumptions which underlie it--then you should not introduce it into your paper. If you do not comment upon quotations, it will seem as if you are asking them to do your argumentative work for you. Remember that different readers will view the quotation in different ways; show the reader what you see in the quotation. This same rule applies to other uses of evidence from the text. For instance, if you want to discuss the significance of the hazel twig or the fish bones, make sure you have something compelling and detailed to say about them. Make sure your comments fit into the argument of the paragraph and also the overall argument.

Avoid summary. It is not necessary to describe events and mention details if they do not serve your thesis. Assume your reader is familiar with your text. You do not have to summarize everything that happens to Cinderella. Just move from one relevant example to the next as you prove your point. Excessive summary will bore your reader, obscure your thesis, and confuse you as you attempt to follow your outline.

Here are some basic rules for developing your argument and using evidence to support it:

Whether you are lawyer arguing a case before a jury, a scientist presenting research results at a conference, or a student writing a paper for a professor, you need EVIDENCE to sustain your argument. When analyzing a work of literature, you need TEXTUAL evidence. There are three basic strategies that can help you support your argument and convince your reader.

**1) STATE YOUR ARGUMENT CLEARLY.** This is what the thesis and method statements accomplish. See the previous handout on the thesis.

**2) PRESENT AND ANALYZE YOUR EVIDENCE.** Textual evidence can take a variety of forms. One can analyze character, imagery, structure, the relationship between the narrator and the reader, the author’s ideological assumptions--to name only a few approaches. You can also analyze individual sentences and how they unfold in time: often there’s a lot of drama there. Word choice (diction), metaphors or other figures of speech, tone, rhetoric (including irony)—all may be important. Different literary approaches focus on different aspects of the text. But whichever key you use to open up the text, there are two basic strategies that will help you present your evidence:

a) Quote a passage from the text that supports your argument. (And make sure you’re quoting the text accurately! It’s surprisingly easy to insert errors.)

b) Brief quotations are best inserted within your own sentences, marked by accurate quotation marks: “this is one example” (2). Follow the quotation by citing the page # in parentheses. For normal English Literature papers we don’t recommend you use footnotes for simple page citations! — so long as you cite the text or texts you’re quoting from at the end of your paper.

c) Longer quotations (10-100+ words) should be indented, this this:

It’s a good idea to have 1-2 indented longer quotations in your paper, highlighting textual evidence you will discuss most carefully because it’s the very best evidence in the whole paper for proving your thesis. Introduce the indented quotation with some discussion that explains its context and why you’re going to focus on it.

Then in the same paragraph follow your indented quotation with a thoughtful and in-depth discussion, walking the reader through the parts of the quotation explaining what’s important and how you interpret it. Don’t assume evidence “speaks for itself.” One or two sentences are NOT enough to discuss indented quotations in college papers. Since literary evidence is normally rich and ambiguous about how to interpret it, you might want to consider several interesting and plausible possible lines of interpretation before you discuss why you find some possible interpretations better than others. (For more on this technique, see the accompanying What Is A Counterargument? link.) Remember too to focus not just on general content in your quotation but on how the passage is written: word choices and their connotations; metaphors; rhetoric; structure (what comes early? what’s saved for later?), etc. We’ll practice this kind of “close” and careful reading all semester. It works especially well for literature but is good for any kind of evidence.

**Your conclusion**

Think of your conclusion as an opportunity to reflect upon your thesis from a different perspective. Climb into a hot air balloon and look down upon the landscape of your paper. Consider some larger issue that your thesis touches on. Bring in a related point that puts your thesis in a new light. Show some further questions that your thesis raises. What you do not want to do is repeat your introduction. Even if your thesis is brilliant, the conclusion should not repeat what you have already said. Challenge your reader with your capacity for theorizing, for looking at the issues underlying your thesis.

**The writing process**

Your first draft is going to be a “rough” draft. Don’t worry about making it perfect on the first attempt. Don’t worry if everything in your argument is not tight. State your argument in the opening paragraph and make sure you know the points you want to cover in the body of the paper. Follow your outline, and if you get stuck, stop writing the draft and work further on your outline.

Based on his own writing process, Peter Schmidt recommends that once you have a good working outline start writing the first paragraph of the body of the paper, not the introduction. Introductions (except for your thesis and maybe a few related lead-in sentences) are usually easier to do after you’ve drafted the paper. If you’d prefer to write a rough intro paragraph to get you started, go ahead. Don’t waste time trying to get the intro “perfect” before you draft the second paragraph: that’s a great way to get writer’s block. Instead, working carefully with evidence you know is good will give you confidence and momentum: your paper’s off and rolling!

One last piece of advice. Write about something you care about. The writing process will be easier; the final outcome will be better. You will enjoy writing more, and you will discover your voice as a writer. No one else can think your thoughts and put them down on the page. Have confidence in that.