

HOW TO DO WELL ON AN ESSAY EXAM

by David W. Boles

Be argumentative in your thesis: "Antigone is a really neat person" is not as effective as "Antigone misinterprets her calling by choosing dishonored blood over the honor of character." The word "because" is an excellent signpost that the argument in your thesis is next. All punctuation belongs INSIDE quotation marks. Make your thesis the first sentence in your essay. That will rivet your attention on supporting your argument as you write. When you write a sentence or finish a paragraph in your essay, refer back to that first sentence and ask yourself if what you just wrote is connected to that thesis. If not, revise what you wrote. DO NOT REPHRASE THE QUESTION IN YOUR THESIS!

A paragraph consists of at least five sentences. Use complete sentences. Edit your essay after you finish writing! No essay is perfect after one pass at composition. You will be provided a Blue Book for the exam. Always plan your essay by first making a five paragraph outline of your argument:

I. Introduction

- a. Thesis as first sentence.
- b. Set up the theory, logic and proof-to-come of your argument.
- c. Explain why your thesis has relevance beyond you.
- d. Be specific! (Don't use your life as argument evidence!)

II. First Paragraph of Evidence

- a. First text quote that supports your argument.
- b. Analysis of why that quote proves your point.
- c. In text citation of the quote. (Sophocles, p. 24, line 23)

III. Second Paragraph of Evidence

- a. Second text quote that supports your argument.
- b. Analysis of why that quote proves your point.
- c. In text citation of the quote. (Sophocles, p. 26, lines 77-81)

IV. Third Paragraph of Evidence

- a. Third text quote that supports your argument.
- b. Analysis of why that quote proves your point.
- c. In text citation of the quote. (Sophocles, p. 27, lines 92-115)

V. Conclusion (NOT a re-statement of your thesis!)

- a. Recast the idea of your thesis in a new way.
- b. Recast the three supporting ideas for your thesis.
- c. Bring in the universal to sum up your individual points.
- d. End with a bang!

EXAMPLE OF ESSAY QUESTIONS:

(This is an example of an essay exam I created for my students at NJIT.)

Sign this paper on the line provided above and turn it in with your Blue Book at the completion of the exam. Please answer one of the following three questions in essay form. You will be graded on the quality of your logic, the strength of your argument and the precision of your evidence and the structure of your answer. You are required to cite at least four examples from the play text to support your thesis for each answer and you will likely need eight text quotes from the plays to fully answer the question.

You have 90 minutes to compose your answers. It should take you at least 50 minutes to successfully complete the exam. You may not leave the room – even if you are finished – until 30 minutes have elapsed from the start of the exam. You may not leave the room and return later. Using the five paragraph structure discussed in your “How to Do Well on an Essay Exam” handout, provide a rough outline of your argument **ON THE BACK OF THIS PAPER** before you begin writing.

DO NOT WRITE PLOT SUMMARY AS PART OF YOUR ARGUMENT. Assume as a fact in evidence that your Instructor has already read the play and understands what happened and why. **DO NOT ASK QUESTIONS IN YOUR ESSAY.** Asking questions in an essay means you are doubling your work as a scholar because, to be successful, you must answer both sides of your question to be intellectually fair.

THE ASSIGNMENT

Choose 4 plays for analysis. Two of the plays must be plays you did not produce. Then, using a compare and contrast essay argument model you researched before today as homework, reveal the “Ethnic and Minority” implications revealed in ONE of the following essay topics...

- 1). Repression as... a means of self advancement, a requirement of managing traditional societal roles and as a path to uncontrolled rage.
- 2). Sexuality as... a tool of political influence, a method of bonding and as a cudgel to control behavior.
- 3). Dreaming as... an expression of cultural atonement, a cure for economic cruelty and as a means of escape.

Rough Notes for Comparing and Contrasting Redemption

Stories Analyzed:

O'Connor (*A Good Man is Hard to Find*), Gilmore (*My Brother, Gary Gilmore*),
Kosinski (*The Miller's Tale*):

Opening Statement:

Redemption in this paper deals with a movement of spirit in the soul. (Expand with historical and textual support of this theory.)

Compare:

All three stories deal with Redemption revealed as viciousness enlightening the soul. (Expand.)

O'Connor: The grandmother's false faith is Redeemed in the killing of her (and her family) by the Misfit. (Redemption can take place outside a single character. Redemption can affect a reader, or the society in which the story spins. God is at work here in the hand of the Misfit.) The soul of society is Redeemed by the actions of the Misfit. Through the forced repentance of a single Sinner, all souls are all washed clean of lies and condescension. (Text examples and analysis.)

Gilmore: The anti-social behavior of his brother Gary causes Mikhail to seek Redemption of the family soul by staying clean throughout his life to avoid comparison with his brother Gary. Mikhail also writes the essay to understand, discover and dissect the cruel familial circumstances that may have led Gary Gilmore to the firing squad. The soul of a family is Redeemed by the lifelong good behavior of a charmed son who tries to set the record straight with the public. (Text examples and analysis.)

Kosinski: The passive narrator's soul is Redeemed by witnessing the miller's menacing and maiming of his cheating wife and the playboy plowboy. (At the conclusion of the violent story the scenes the young narrator witnessed causes him to Redeem his passive life. Outside viciousness causes Redemption from within.) The future soul of the young narrator is Redeemed through his own promissory introspection. (Text examples and analysis.)

Contrast:

While the idea of Redemption enlightening the soul via viciousness is similarly powerful in each story, the methods each author uses to uniquely reveal Redemption causes for a contrast in their unwinding. (Expand.)

O'Connor: Her idea of Redemption is based on the Roman Catholic philosophy of religious pleasure and righteous punishment inexorably bound as one: Live a false and rotten life and God will punish that sin in order to Redeem the subsequent cruelty perpetuated upon his people; live honestly and faithfully and reap the rewards. Redemption via murder is actually for the greater good of all mankind. (Text examples and analysis.)

Gilmore: His idea of Redemption is more personal than O'Connor's. He seeks Redemption of a family name that has been sullied by forces he cannot know or control. He tries to Redeem the life of his misfit brother by endeavoring to reveal the familiar forces of a distant father that caused Gary's life to crumble. Redemption is sought to cleanse the wounded family name in public by reviling the private killing done by a misbegotten blood brother. (Text examples and analysis.)

Kosinski: His idea of Redemption is that it cannot be achieved without the awareness of self and the desire to change the status of the soul. The young narrator looks inside himself to analyze the effect of the cruelty witnessed and how it might challenge his future well-being. His vow to remember what he had already seen in his life after viewing the miller's blinding of the plowboy with a spoon is a Redemption of a sin he shall never forget because he makes it his own. Redemption causes inner change for the future good of the narrator's soul by accepting the idea that life is precious and fragile and that from each moment on in his life, all experiences must be relished and enjoyed in case pieces of him are damaged or destroyed. Redemption is to remember. (Text examples and analysis.)

Conclusion:

The idea of Redemption in these three stories is similar in that lives are permanently changed in order to achieve a cleansing of the eternal soul. The three stories differ in that in each Redemption is revealed in different forms with unique lessons for society, the family, and the unaware. (Expand with mirrored references from the paper.)