

Basic Guidelines for Short Critical Papers

YOU DO NEED TO . . .

. . . have some **main idea** or **thesis** for your paper. This might be a point you want to make or a question you want to answer about the play(s)/scene(s) you write about. Choose a topic you care about. In any case, you must have a clear idea of **what you want the reader to learn from your paper**. You should be able to state your main idea in a sentence or two.

. . . include an introduction that lets your reader know:

- 1) what play(s)/scene(s) you're discussing
- 2) what aspect of the play(s)/scene(s) you will focus on (your topic)
- 3) what point you intend to make about your topic (your thesis)

. . . support your general statements with specific evidence from the text. Back up your assertions with quotations where possible, paraphrase where necessary. Start with the text and stay close to it. Respond to it honestly. Test your impressions by re-reading it, perhaps several times. Be sure you explain how the quotation you've chosen supports your point. One example is the minimum; more than three are usually superfluous. If a character's specific words are important, you should quote them directly and explain what is significant about them.

. . . include line references for all direct quotations (see the second handout). If your paper deals with more than one play, be sure your reader can tell which one you're quoting from.

. . . write in the present tense ("When she greets him, Titania **says** to Oberon . . ."). When you do this, it makes your reader feel as if he or she is reliving the action of the play.

. . . arrange your points in a logical and coherent fashion. Some common ordering strategies are:

- * from least important to most important
- * from least interesting to most interesting
- * from most obvious to least obvious
- * from simplest to most complex

Be careful when you apply these kinds of strategies, though. You shouldn't let your paper become a shopping list of unrelated ideas and observations. In a paper which weighs both sides of some question, it is often most effective to save **your side** for last.

YOU DON'T NEED TO . . .

. . . retell the story or explain who the characters are. Only summarize the plot or emphasize relationships between characters when doing so contributes to the point you're making. You can always assume that the reader of a critical literary analysis is familiar with the primary work you're discussing; your object is to make your reader understand some aspect of the work that might be puzzling or problematic. (Along these lines, distinguish between critical judgments and value judgments; you don't need, for instance, to persuade your reader that a given play is 'good' or that Shakespeare is a 'great' playwright.)

. . . make the organization of your paper conform to the plot of the play you are writing about. In other words, if you want to discuss the end of the play before the beginning, feel free to do so. You don't need to follow the plot order unless you are arguing that an earlier scene significantly alters our perception of a later event. You should use any organization that supports your thesis effectively.

. . . quote an entire speech or passage when all you really need is a single sentence. In fact, you need not quote an entire line or sentence if all that is required is a word or a phrase. Only quote what is essential to make your point.