



Henry Fuseli, *The Nightmare* (1781)

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English & Cultural Studies 3M06
British Romantic Literature and Culture

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First Term Essays for English & Cultural Studies 3M06: **Some Problems and Solutions**

It was a great pleasure marking your first term essays. Many of you composed very good essays, essays that were thoughtful, illuminating, well-written, and well-argued. After thirty years in the classroom and after having marked thousands of essays, I have never stopped being moved by students who genuinely struggle with the texts, and who actively puzzle out their questions and wrestle with their details.

Now, it's true that some of you ran into some difficulties in crafting your essays. But know this: no student is fated to write at one level of competence and one only. Every student can learn to write better term papers. To be sure, it takes hard work and a substantial

commitment to your own education to do so. Being fully involved in the course is one important key: attending lectures, taking notes in class, reading the assigned materials before and after class, bringing the assigned materials to class, keeping up on the Study Questions and Course Blog, discussing your work with Roshaya, and carefully considering the marking commentary on your assignments. The essay is not an assignment in isolation from the rest of the course but an integral part of the course. The quality of your essay work is directly related to whether you are fully involved in the course, so a good place to begin improving your essays is to think about improving your engagement with the course. Writing well and committing yourself to writing well simply makes sense for students enrolled in a program in which the powers of language are the major focus. You've got some good resources to help you out. Meeting with Roshaya to discuss specific questions is one step. Making an appointment with the Writing Tutors and attending their workshops is another. The marking commentary that I have provided on your essay should prove useful, as well as the marking commentary that you have received on essays for other courses. Don't forget too about the enormous resources that are available on-line, including the materials to which I refer in the Essay Questions document (i.e., the hand-outs created by the Writing Center at Harvard university: <http://www.fas.harvard.edu/~wricntr/resources.html><http://www.fas.harvard.edu/~wricntr/resources.html>). But in the end it all depends on you, and on your commitment to the course and to putting all this knowledge and assistance into practice.

As I say, many students in the course wrote wonderful essays. Others ran into some difficulties. But I have complete confidence that each student is in a position to strengthen his or her essay writing skills, no matter what the difficulty. The trick here is to be unusually rigorous about your writing practices, i.e., how you go about formulating your thesis and unfolding your argument through analysing the texts. Sketching out drafts of your essay is a great place to begin. But then you must ask some hard questions about your draft work. Is my argument as strong and persuasive as I can make it, or is it marred or diminished by problems that I haven't yet taken the time to focus on and solve? Writing a persuasive essay often means that you must be unusually frank—even severe—with yourself, thinking candidly about your existing writing and thinking habits. That kind of work takes time. Find the courage to break with those habits that are preventing you from growing as a thinker and writer. Below are nine problem areas to consider, coupled with suggestions on how to improve your essay writing skills. Whether you received a marking commentary for your essay or not, I invite you to return to your essay in light of my comments here:

1) Eliminate all errors in grammar and punctuation and spelling:

As the Essay Questions document notes, your essays should be free of errors in grammar, punctuation, and spelling. A couple of errors are bound to creep in, sure. It happens to the best of us! But more than one or two such errors suggests that there are other problems, everything from a disinterest in learning the basic rules of the language to a reluctance to proof-read your essay carefully before handing it in. Common errors that I observed in your essays include: garbled sentences, sentence fragments, run-on sentences, incorrect use of commas, faulty and vague pronoun reference (especially sentences beginning with "This"), spelling errors (including

misspellings of titles, as well as the names of authors and your instructor), the use of the passive rather than the active voice, and diction errors (for example, using “respectable” when you mean “respective”). “It’s” is only ever a contraction for “it is.” Semicolons precede correlative conjunctions (“however,” “nevertheless”) joining independent clauses. Submitting an essay free of these kinds of errors is significant enough that the Essay Questions document specifically flags it.

2) Develop and begin with a strong thesis statement:

Essays should begin with a strong thesis statement. Be careful not to start with vague, imprecise, and generalizing claims. Take care not to repeat or paraphrase the essay question and let that stand as your thesis statement. Begin instead with a quite particular wager, assertion, or claim. That means thinking carefully before you begin your essay about what it is *specifically* that you want to argue in your essay. The essay topics are of necessity broadly conceived. Your task is to take one of those topics and to develop a specific thesis. If you are unsure what it is in particular that you want to claim in your essay, or if that claim is unclear, stop and reassess the situation. You’ll need to develop a clearly defined and well-articulated thesis *before* you begin to write your essay since so much of the success of your argument will depend on having such a thesis thought out and in place. Start your essay with a specific claim or group of linked claims that your essay will then demonstrate and flesh out. To repeat: begin with wagering a very particular argument, stating up front that you intend to make a particular case about particular works.

Of course, developing a thesis takes time and work, beginning with a close and careful reading of the course materials. For example, one of the essay questions invites you to consider the ways in which Romantic thinkers negotiate the relationship between the inner psychic world and the outer social and natural world. The next step is yours: how, exactly, does a particular Romantic thinker—Blake, for example—treat that relationship? Your thesis statement should include sentences that look like this:

Blake is fascinated and troubled by the degree to which vulnerable subjects—children and women, in particular—absorb and reproduce racial, sexual, and gendered forms of social violence. Culturally forged manacles are for Blake only the beginning of a process of incarceration and exclusion that culminates in something much darker, namely “mind forg’d manacles.” Although different characters in Blake imprison themselves differently, they all share a similar impairment: they are immobilized and find it almost impossible to imagine a world otherwise than the one in which they are trapped.

Then the rest of your essay should be taken up demonstrating where specifically we see evidence of Blake’s particular fascination with internalized forms of imprisonment, i.e., how human beings are differently coerced into enslaving themselves. Your task will be to analyse a selection of Blake’s texts with an eye to demonstrating that self-imprisonment differs, sometimes sharply, depending on who it is that is suffering incarceration. But your thesis contains another wager, giving your essay a sharper focus. For all their differences, these prisoners share a

common trait: their imaginations are compromised. Notice that the thesis statement becomes more and more refined and specific, moving from social to psychic forms of imprisonment and then culminating in a particular claim about the imagination.

The wonderful thing about starting an essay with a strong thesis statement like this one is that you can then use that statement to guide all of your subsequent remarks. All subsequent remarks—i.e., the body of your essay—should be taken up *demonstrating*, through close and careful analyses of the materials at hand, why and how your thesis is viable, why and how it describes something actually happening in the materials at hand. Once you have developed a strong opening statement, you can then check to ensure that every subsequent paragraph in your essay is answerable to that statement, i.e., that every subsequent paragraph is used in some way to marshal evidence to support your opening claim. If any of your paragraphs or sentences do not accomplish that work, jettison them. A good thesis statement operates like a guide, steering your essay on course while also giving your essay a particular focus. A good thesis statement also operates like a sieve, letting you sift out any filler taking up valuable space in your essay.

To recapitulate: Does your thesis statement contain a specific wager or assertion or does it only promise that your essay will become more specific later on? Let's say that the suggested essay topic is: "Discuss the traffic in human beings in the work of William Blake." A weak thesis statement would be something like: "I will explore Blake's focus on the traffic in human beings." Or: "Blake addresses the problem of the traffic in human beings in a number of ways." These statements provide nothing substantive. They do not wager a particular argument or claim. They do not contain a thesis. A reader might well ask: *What exactly are you going to explore in Blake? What specifically does Blake say about the traffic in human beings?* A much more effective thesis statement would be:

As *Visions of the Daughters of Albion* vividly demonstrates, William Blake never views the traffic in human beings as an isolated problem. Instead he locates slavery in the midst of other forms of social violence and exclusion, including the degradation of women and the exploitation of children. Moreover, Blake treats slavery not simply as an economic phenomenon in which the "strong" exploit the "weak" and "vulnerable" to make a profit. For the British visionary, slavery is finally an expression of the abject failure of the human imagination. Those who treat human beings as property suffer from a twofold problem: the inability to imagine the world otherwise than it is, and the inability to imagine how others think and feel.

Notice here that you are wagering a particular thesis *about* slavery in Blake's work rather than falling back on a generalization, i.e., that Blake is troubled by slavery. Your essay will demonstrate that Blake consistently connects the enslavement of Africans to other kinds of enslavement, the traffic in Africans to the traffic in women and children. More: your assertion is that Blake's *Visions of the Daughters of Albion* in particular brings out how slavers are not just late 18th-century capitalists, exploiting human beings for the profit motive. They suffer from a particular deformation of the mind, without which they could not do the things that they do to other human beings. Notice that the revised thesis statement doesn't remain as a generalization but instead becomes more and more focussed and specific. Here you are making

a wager: slavery isn't simply a horrid form of commerce but is also a symptom of a warped way of viewing the world. What's helpful about beginning with this kind of focussed and specific thesis statement is that it can then guide all your subsequent remarks. The rest of the essay will be taken up with selecting and then discussing a handful of richly suggestive scenes in *Visions of the Daughters of Albion*. A good analysis, and one that is answerable to your thesis statement, carries closely with the details in those scenes, demonstrating how Blake connects slavery not only to other forms of violence but also, more precisely, to a failure of the imagination.

One more example. Say the essay topic is Blake's "composite art." Something like: "Discuss how Blake's composite art brings words and images into a complex relationship." An effective thesis statement could be:

William Blake's *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* is a vivid example of composite art, i.e., the combination of words and pictures that adds up to more than the sum of its two parts. In other words, Blake's words don't form mere captions for his images, no more than his images function as illustrations for his poetry. The relationship between word and image is more complicated and indeed varies considerably from text to text. In the case of *The Tyger*, the images directly contradict the speaker's hysterical words, suggesting that he suffers from a distorted view of the world that we as readers do not share. In *The Chimney Sweeper* of the *Songs of Innocence* something different happens. There the image reproduces the details of the dream that pacifies the child slaves, inviting astute readers to "wake up" from the nightmare of late 18th-century British history. In *London*, the accompanying image appears at first to have little to do with the poem. But a closer analysis reveals that the image offers hope for a future that the poem itself--so dark and sorrowful--seems reluctant to imagine.

Note that the thesis statement here begins with a short working definition of a key term for the essay, namely "composite art." Ensure that you define your key terms. The thesis statement then wagers a specific claim about Blake's composite art: that it functions differently in different poems from the *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*. Then the thesis statement becomes even more focussed and specific, wagering a position about each of the three poems that the essay will then take up. More focussed and specific thesis statements are invariably stronger, and will help strengthen the essay as a whole.

Remember that composing a persuasive thesis statement isn't simply a matter of observing an agreed-upon convention in essay writing. It shouldn't be treated mechanically as something you are expected to do. A persuasive thesis statement is instead an essential part of the thinking process that goes into an essay. It is the sign that you have thought carefully about the question or topic at hand. It is a sign that you have read the relevant course materials closely, and that you have developed an argument about those materials.

3) Ground your essays in analyses of the details of the texts:

Watch out for a tendency to speak in vague generalizations about the materials at hand. A persuasive essay is an essay that moves quickly to a series of linked discussions of particular

passages in the texts, linking those discussions to your essay's larger concerns and claims. Don't hold the texts at a safe distance from your essay, working only with large generalizations! Instead, work closely and carefully with the details of the texts, for it is there that the most important things are happening and where you will find the material that you need to support your essay's opening thesis. But be careful too not to pull bits and pieces of the text out of their context, thereby atomizing the texts, breaking them up, as it were, and looking at those fragments in isolation. When discussing particular details in particular passages, ensure that you treat these details and passages as part of a larger whole. For example, it matters who is speaking and in what context. In focussing on the details, don't lose sight of the larger settings in which those details are embedded. Don't forget that when you cite a passage from the text you are then responsible for discussing its details. Watch out for a tendency to assume that the cited passage speaks for itself. Don't cite a passage and then move quickly past it.

To recapitulate: Demonstrate that you have read the course material slowly and carefully by anchoring most of your essay in the discussion of the details of the texts at hand. Look over an early draft of your essay: it should be consistently routed through analyses of specific passages from the texts; it should never stray far from close and careful analyses of the texts' details. If your essay isn't mostly taken up with analyses of this kind, then it's time to go back and revise your essay accordingly.

4) Analyse the texts details rather than summarize them:

Be careful not to substitute an *active* engagement with the texts' details for a *passive* summary or paraphrase of them. So, for example, when you cite a passage from the material, avoid simply describing what is happening or what is being said. Instead, move quickly to a discussion of the cited passage, i.e., an engagement with its fine-grained details. Wrestle with those details. Puzzle them out. Consistently discuss how those details demonstrate your essay's thesis or wager. Summaries of the texts are not analyses.

5) Avoid repeating yourself:

Watch out for a tendency to say the same thing. Avoid repeating yourself or returning again and again to one point. You don't want to substitute real analyses of the materials with this kind of filler. Rather than repeating yourself, push your argument forward. Develop and complicate your claims. Deepen your analyses of the materials at hand. Pay close attention to the details in the texts. Seek other passages in the text where you can grow your analyses. Don't get stuck in a loop, unable to move forward in your remarks.

6) Keep your essay on track:

Ensure that your essay follows a certain identifiable thread. Be careful not to let your remarks "drift" into other topics or concerns that aren't directly related to your thesis and to demonstrating your thesis. The great thing about starting with a strong thesis is that you can then check to see that all subsequent remarks in your essay are answerable to that thesis. If you find yourself talking about unrelated matters or questions, jettison that material. Use the limited

time and space that you have in your essay to demonstrate the merits of your particular thesis. Keep on track.

7) Develop an essay that moves significantly beyond what is said in class:

Developing an essay that moves significantly beyond what was said in class is significant enough that the Essay Questions document specifically mentions it. It is important not to use your essay as a place merely to recapitulate the lectures. The lectures are a great place to begin, but for the purposes of your essay they are meant only to be a jump-off point. Have confidence in the richly suggestive nature of the material on the course and in your abilities to find extraordinarily interesting things in that material! Develop arguments and analyses that you can truly call your own. The texts on the course will always yield up *much* more than what was addressed in class. Take the time to discover what remains to be said about those texts. Be careful not to allow your essay to be overtaken with a paraphrase of remarks made in lectures. Instead develop new arguments based on the lectures. Or use remarks made in class as an invitation to explore passages in the course materials that weren't discussed in class. Or return to passages in the course materials that we explored in class and discuss those passages in much greater detail, unlocking things from those passages that weren't discussed in class or only discussed fleetingly.

8) Take the time and effort to write a persuasive essay:

Some essays showed tell-tale signs of being way too hastily written and hastily thought out. A too hastily written essay does not give you a real chance to demonstrate your strengths and abilities as a student of literature. If you found yourself rushed, now would be a great opportunity to think about how you are managing your time when it comes to completing significantly weighted assignments like the essays for 3M06. Believe me, I know how busy you are, juggling jobs, course-work, and meeting other pressing commitments. Sometimes there just isn't enough time to put together a persuasive essay. I get that. And yet it is important to face facts: a good essay demands lots of rigorous effort, and that kind of effort takes time, quality time. And it takes some smart planning. Figure out ways to ensure that you give yourself enough time to be able to focus carefully on the essay assignment. Give yourself enough time not only to read the materials and form a cogent thesis, but also to write and to revise drafts of your essay. You want to have enough time to perfect an argument in which can rightly place confidence. Ensure that you find a quiet space where you can do this work without being interrupted. It's true, it is sometimes possible to write a persuasive essay very rapidly, although the conditions need to be exactly right. For the most part, however, writing quickly results in producing an early draft of your essay rather than a proper final version. The key is not to submit a draft version of your essay--hastily written and marred by unformed and incomplete arguments--but something more composed, polished, and thoughtful. --Something, in other words, that more accurately captures your commitment to the course.

9) Jump in:

Don't waste any time in your essay's opening paragraphs circling around the subject or "warming up" to the subject. Instead, *engage* the subject at hand directly and in a focussed way. Don't inadvertently come across like you are holding the subject of your essay away from yourself, or that you are reluctant to proceed ! In an assignment of this length, and indeed in an assignment of *any* length, use your time efficiently and effectively. So *jump in*. Begin right away with a thesis statement, pointing your reader to the particular focus of your essay, the particular wager that you are making. If you find yourself filling up the first several paragraphs or couple of pages with generalizing prefatory remarks that may be because you haven't yet developed a focus and a wager for your essay. Don't waste time recapitulating the essay topic or question. Instead, move immediately to articulating a particular thesis prompted by that topic or question.

I look forward to seeing your essay work for Term II.

David L. Clark