Expository Writing 20.142: “Jane Austen, Then and Now”

Instructor Details:
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Our topic:
Jane Austen’s importance lies both inside and outside the university. A writer of canonical novels that are also widely read for pleasure by readers with no academic agenda, she inspires Hollywood screenplays as readily as scholarly treatises. Why do so many people still read Jane Austen, and what is she trying to tell us? What is at stake in her marriage plots, for readers of her own socio-historical moments and ours? Is she better understood as a conservative or a liberal-progressive voice? Are popular adaptations of her work missing the point or revitalizing the message? These are some of the contestable questions about Jane Austen that we may take up. During the course of the semester, you will read selected fiction by Austen; consider film adaptations of her best-known novel; and assess the claims of Austen scholars, all in order to develop your own arguments about Austen. In Unit 1, “The Art of Persuasion,” we will undertake a close reading of her last published novel to assess its stance on family, society, and social mobility. In Unit 2, “Jane Austen at the Movies,” we will consider several screen adaptations of Pride and Prejudice to analyze ways in which her most iconic novel has been re-envisioned. In Unit 3, “Civil Discourse: Jane Austen and the Critics,” students will write an independent research paper that speaks to the social politics of an Austen novel or adaptation of their choice.

How “Expos” works:
Expos sections consist of three units, each of which is designed around the kind of essay you will write for that unit. Each of these essays will be an exercise in academic argument, and they progress from a one-source “close reading” essay of 4-5 pages, to a comparative essay of 6-7 pages, to an 8-12 page research paper. Our assigned readings and class discussions are intended to help you practice the kind of thinking you need to undertake in order to write the essay. In each unit, you will develop your essay over the course of a four-part cycle that allows you to test out ideas; receive feedback; and then further develop both your thinking and your prose expression of that thinking. Here’s how each cycle goes:
1. response paper (a preliminary exercise designed to help you develop the essay, so you’re never drafting without something to build from)
2. draft (treat this like a final essay in any other course)
3. group workshop and one-on-one conference
4. revision (a substantial revision, based on your own further thinking about your sources(s) and your argument and feedback received on your draft)
Required Texts:

*Persuasion*, Penguin edition  (available at the Coop)
*(You must purchase this version* even if you happen to own another version so that we can refer to the same page numbers in class and so that I can find my way to the textual evidence you cite in your Unit 1 essay.)*

*Pride and Prejudice*, Penguin edition preferred (available at the Coop)
*(If you don’t already own a copy, please purchase this one.)*

A coursepack with some required or recommended readings, to be purchased from Gnomon Copy (1308 Mass Ave.) by the start of Unit 2.

In Unit 2 you will need to view several films adaptations of *Pride and Prejudice*. They are all on 5-hour reserve at Lamont Library, but I urge you to purchase a copy of the one you choose to write about. **You will need to review your film evidence multiple times and can only guarantee adequate access by procuring your own copy.** (These films are available for purchase from Amazon, and in some cases from ITunes. If you’re a Netflix subscriber, you can get them that way.) If you are writing about an Austen novel in Unit 3 other than the ones assigned in the first two units, you will need to obtain your own working copy of that novel; any edition is fine, though I recommend the Penguin or Oxford paperback.

Two other essential course texts are *The Harvard Guide to Using Sources* (usingsources.fas.harvard.edu) and “The Elements of Academic Argument,” an Expos document that is posted on the course website.

**General resources you may wish to acquire:**

Joseph M. Williams, *Style: Ten Lessons in Clarity and Grace* (Longman)
I won’t be assigning this book, but I recommend it as an excellent guide to effective sentence-level writing. You can order a copy through the Coop or from Amazon.

Diana Hacker, *A Pocket Style Manual* (Bedford)
This is a useful general reference guide that includes a section on grammar.

*MLA Guide to Writers of Research Papers*
This title is stocked by the Coop and other local bookstores. *The Harvard Guide to Using Sources* includes a brief introduction to MLA format, the citation method used in this Expos section, but for more complicated citation issues, you’ll need to refer to this manual. If you don’t choose to purchase a copy, be prepared to consult one in the reference room of Widener or Lamont as needed.
Essay #1 Close Analysis of *Persuasion* (5 pages)

**The assignment:**
Our study of Austen begins with a concentrated reading of *Persuasion*. By scrutinizing the author’s last published novel, whose marriage plot unfolds in the context of a society in transition, we are attempting to arrive at a deeper understanding of what’s at stake in Austen’s fiction. Your Unit 1 writing assignment is likewise an exercise in concentrated reading; in this first essay, you will explore a problem or issue in the novel by undertaking a close analysis of relevant, selected textual evidence. (Identifying that issue, one that interests you and that you can discuss in a way that sustains a reader’s interest, will be a major step in the development of this essay; college-level writing assignments often require you to develop your own question to address.) The “Elements of Academic Writing” that this assignment prioritizes (and therefore the elements most central to the evaluation of your essay) are evidence; analysis; thesis; and defining the “question or problem.”

**Evidence:**
Close analysis essays (or close readings, to use the term adopted in literature classes) are built out of material the writer pulls out of the source text. In other words, _evidence in the text generates the question the essay proposes to answer as well as the means to arrive at an answer_ (in the form of a thesis claim). In a one-source close analysis assignment like this, it’s essential that you don’t consult outside sources or browse the Web to brainstorm. Instead, turn to the text of the novel--to its language, especially--in search of questions, ideas, and inspiration. (As you are reading the novel, read with a pen or pencil in hand so you can mark lines or passages that seem particularly important or puzzling to you. Reviewing what you marked will help get you started when it’s time to sit down to figure out what might be worth writing about.)

One feature of writing about a novel as opposed to, say, a sonnet, is that you can’t deal with the entire text. Therefore, close readings of novels generally focus on a few specific passages that speak to a common issue or problem. _Your challenge is to find specific moments in the text that bring a broader issue or problem into particular focus_. These crystallizing passages will provide the building blocks for the argument you construct. (A passage might be as short as a paragraph or as long as a scene that plays out over several pages. Remember that it’s better to discuss a few pieces of evidence in depth and detail than to treat numerous passages more superficially.)

There are many issues a reader might find interesting or puzzling in *Persuasion*: issues including, to name just a few, ambiguities or complications in the novel’s treatment of social class; contrasting versions or notions of family; the tension between the importance of discretion on the one hand and the importance of frank and effective communication on the other. Your first response paper will ask you to identify and start to work through two or three passages, each of which sheds light on an issue or idea or problem you think is worth writing about.
Analysis:
As a critical practice, close analysis of a text requires careful attention to the writer’s language. As you discuss your evidence in the essay, it’s important to bear in mind the distinction between summary and analysis. The point of close reading or close analysis isn’t to summarize what the text literally says, but rather to interrogate and explain underlying meanings and implications of your textual evidence. *Your analysis should reveal something to your reader that he or she would not see without the intervention of your critical intelligence.* Think about implicit as well as explicit meanings, about what value systems seem to be operating in the fictional world you’re writing about, and about the way elements like word choice and sentence structure advance the communication of ideas and values. (If the passage employs specific rhetorical devices like allusion, imagery, or metaphor, you’ll want to think about their significance. Remember, though, that the point isn’t to identify literary devices as such, but rather to explicate the meaning they help to convey, if those meanings are relevant to your argument about the novel.)

Thesis:
Your thesis should advance a claim about the issue or topic or problem that your passages allow you to interrogate. It should be an analytic claim, not a descriptive statement, i.e., a proposition that is not self-evident. (In class we’ll discuss this distinction and the features that make for a strong college-level thesis claim.) *The best close analysis arguments are formed when a writer allows her reflection on the textual evidence to lead her to a thesis claim (rather than looking to the text to support a thesis generated in advance of that reflection on the evidence).*

Defining the “Question or Problem”:
A major goal of your introduction is to communicate to the writer not only what the focus of the essay is, but why. What question or problem will the analysis address? Why is that a significant question or problem? That gives the reader a sense of what’s at stake in the thesis claim the essay proposes and develops. The handout “Introductions and Motive,” posted on the course website, provides some guidelines and suggestions for treatment of our fourth prioritized “element” as you fashion your introduction.
Essay 2:

_Pride and Prejudice_ as novel and film (6-7 pages)

In Unit 2, you will write about one film adaptation of Austen’s most iconic novel, _Pride and Prejudice_, in order to advance an argument about some aspect of that film in relation to the novel. Filmed versions from which you may choose are the 1940 Hollywood classic with Greer Garson and Laurence Oliver; the 1995 BBC miniseries starring Colin Firth and Jennifer Ehle; Joe Wright’s 2005 film starring Keira Knightly and Matthew Macfadyen; and Gurinder Chadha’s 2004 Bollywood-inspired _Bride and Prejudice_. It can be helpful to think of the film as an interpretation of the novel on which it is based, and also to think of the film as a text that can be compared to Austen’s text. Think about what slant or emphasis the film seems to place on Austen’s novel.

To write this essay, you will need to focus on a particular aspect of the relationship between the film and the novel. Questions you might think about upon viewing the films to help you to arrive at your analytic focus for your essay about one of those films include the following:

-- What happens to the characters, now performed by actors whose acting styles and physical qualities contribute to characterization? What strikes you about a given film’s characterization of Elizabeth, of Darcy, of Mr. Bennet, etc.? What do these film versions emphasize or change about their counterpart in the novel?

-- Are there significant changes to the original text (changes in dialogue, in narrative event, in detail, etc.), and if so, what do you think is at issue or at stake with those alterations?

-- Is there a particular scene or episode in which the relationship between the original and the adaptation is particularly interesting or revelatory?

-- Does the film seem to highlight one particular aspect of Austen’s narrative?

A number of things you worked on in Unit 1 will be transferable to this second essay. As you did in the last essay, you will develop a contestable thesis claim; will support your argument with textual evidence; and will write an introduction that communicates what is at stake in the argument, thus “framing” the thesis. You will also apply the specific analytic practice you learned in unit 1, close analysis, to the evidence you isolate for commentary. Whatever your argument is, its development will depend on careful analysis of film evidence. Since you are considering the film in relation to the adaptation of the novel on which it is based, some of your essays may also include some “close reading” of passages from the novel, though in other cases briefer explications of or references to pertinent elements in the novel will suffice. In other words, it follows from the terms of the assignment that the film will provide the majority of the specific evidence you will closely analyze in this essay (just as you analyzed _Persuasion_’s terms of representation in Unit 1).

While close reading a film is analogous to close reading literature, it requires you to analyze visual language. As Timothy Corrigan explains in _A Short Guide to Writing About Film_, “Films are not just about a story, character, or place, or a way of life; they are also what John Berger has called a ‘way of seeing’ those elements. . . .To write an
intelligent, perceptive analysis of the stories and characters in the movies, you must be prepared to see them as constructed. . .” (20, emphasis added). Therefore the writer of an essay on film must communicate “not just what you see but how the image makes you see people and things in a certain way and in a certain relationship to one another” (Corrigan 56-7, emphasis added). To get a handle on working with this new kind of evidence, carefully read the chapters from Timothy Corrigan’s manual that are included in the coursepack. These chapters from Corrigan provide helpful tips about what to look for in film images and will also introduce you to the standard vocabulary used to talk about the language of film. We will spend some time in class collectively examining some shots or sequences from several Pride and Prejudice film adaptations in order to practice the analysis of film evidence. (I have also placed a handout on the website that reviews relevant points from Corrigan; this document is intended as a supplement to Corrigan, not a substitute for the assigned reading.)

Don’t undertake research for this essay; as in Unit 1, the point is for you to engage directly with the primary sources in order to generate an essay from your own ideas about them. However, I will distribute a handout with some claims made by film critics and scholars about one of these adaptations—or about the phenomenon of adaptation itself—that may prove useful for furthering our own thinking about our Unit 2 primary sources. If you would find it helpful to draw on one of those claims in your introduction in order to suggest what is stake in your argument, i.e., to help establish the essay’s “motive,” you may do so. If you do, confine your use of the secondary source to your introductory framing: the body of the essay should consist exclusively of your own textual analysis. Please note that this use of a claim from a secondary source to help launch your argument is allowed but not required; it is equally possibly to derive the sense of “what’s at stake” from the friction between the two primary sources, the novel and the film.
On the first day of our course, you were introduced to an overarching debate in Austen scholarship: is Austen best understood as a liberal-progressive or a conservative novelist? In Unit 3 you will weigh in on that debate by writing an essay whose argument concerns the social commentary advanced by one Austen novel of your choice. (You are not restricted to the two novels that have already been assigned, but if you want to take on a different one, you will need to have finished reading it by the end of the first week of the unit.) You will focus your argument by analyzing one particular element in the novel that speaks to the novel’s social analysis. That particular element on which you'll train your critical attention might be a character, a marriage, a keyword (for example, “duty” in the case of Persuasion), or anything in the novel whose representation speaks to the vision of society the novel advances, such as Pemberley in Pride and Prejudice or the navy in Persuasion. Choosing a specific focus that allows you to intervene meaningfully in that larger and ongoing debate will be an important step in the development of this independent research paper.

If you would prefer to write about a film adaptation, you will make an argument about the socio-political slant the film text places on the Austen source material, likewise with a focus on a specific aspect of the film in question. (For instance, you might consider the expanded role of the youngest daughter in Ang Lee’s Sense and Sensibility, or the way any film adaptation handles a specific character.)

For this essay you will research some of the critical “conversation” about your central source text (whether novel or film adaptation), looking for articles and essays whose arguments can help you develop and advance your own. Depending on your specific focus and approach, you may also be researching relevant historical or cultural contexts. The main difference between this essay and the previous two is that for the first time, you will be incorporating secondary sources in order to engage on the page with what others—including at least one scholarly commentator—have argued about Austen (or one of her adaptors). Of course you will still be considering evidence from the central source text, the film or novel you are writing about, but this time you will also be considering evidence provided by at least four additional sources: secondary sources that provide either claims or information, and, if relevant, additional primary sources. (In class we will go into further detail about kinds of sources and about source functions.) You may use sources assigned to the entire class in Unit 3 if they are appropriate, but at least two sources must be ones you find on your own.

The new skills targeted in this unit are:

--Locating and evaluating appropriate sources for college-level essays

--Reading effectively and representing accurately a scholarly source’s argument
--Engaging with the arguments of others and positioning your own claims in relation to theirs

--Integrating multiple sources in an essay

The “old” skills you will continue to target include:

--Selection and analysis of evidence

--Framing your argument compellingly

--Structuring your essay well with logical organization and effective transitions

--Clear and elegant sentence-level writing