

The purpose of the second paper is to demonstrate how well you can respond critically and analytically to an event and/or issue that reaches beyond your immediate experience and is best understood through investigation and research.

Introduction

A basic premise of this course is the importance of being aware of the ways in which our lives are influenced by politics, the media, social mores, religion, philosophy, education, and the arts. Writing well – critically, analytically, and convincingly – depends in large part on our knowledge of the forces that shape us and the world.

First, consider the origins of our opinions on issues like the war in Afghanistan or the state of the economy. They may be hard to pinpoint, perhaps only traceable to a few scant sources: some news headlines or blog comments, snatches of speeches by government officials, or occasional TV news reports. Sometimes these opinions are based solely on views expressed by friends or family members. If so, we have to question just how reliable and solid our opinions actually are.

This paper will ask you to investigate a subject in greater depth, reforming and supplementing your knowledge of the subject by listening to and analyzing the views of experts in the field.

It can be frustrating for students in English 1101 to complete a research paper because (1) their knowledge of a subject may be quite restricted and (2) they may not be familiar with important scholars or journalists in the field. The advantage of writing a research paper related to course content (as you do in history, sociology, anthropology or other classes) is that your professor will have covered background material essential to your paper and very often introduced you to outstanding scholars in the field, both of which are of immense help in directing your research.

Without this kind of preparation and guidance, students often just turn to the internet, squandering their time and energy by attempting to sort through hundreds, even thousands, of documents retrieved from Google or other databases. They also have little basis for determining the reliability of a particular writer or website. Therefore, we will approach this paper by simulating the classroom situation described above: by first gaining a broader knowledge of your subject and becoming acquainted with respected writers/scholars in the field.

Source Material

You will use a Frontline documentary as your source material for this paper. (The web address is <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline>.) This will allow you quick and efficient access to a lot of information about a topic, without scattering your efforts. These reports (roughly equivalent to extended classroom lectures) are the result of intensive research and analysis – a compilation of extensive news coverage, along with interviews or comments by journalists, academic experts, and those actually involved in the events being investigated.

Note: Some programs may not be suitable for the purposes of this paper because of limited scope or intent or because they are dated. I will discuss this further in class. See the attachment titled "Notes on Frontline Programs" at the bottom of this page for 1) a list of programs that are not suitable for this paper and 2) concerns with other programs that should be considered before selecting them.

The Process

As you watch the program, take notes on what interests you most. (Most of the reports have closed captioning so you can quote accurately.) Be sure to record your reactions and comments. Once you have reviewed your notes, you will be able to formulate a clear thesis for your paper. Remember that the paper must be an analytical response to the content of the program, not merely a discussion of your emotional reaction to the events depicted or just a summary of the information included in the report.

Watch only this documentary. You may also watch or read extended interviews and consult the program transcript. However, at this point do not read viewers' responses, linked articles, suggested readings, or any other information published on the website.

Often when students read this supplemental material they begin doubting their ability to respond as effectively as the experts or even other viewers, substituting published opinions for their own. In some cases, students may totally lose confidence and end by plagiarizing these sources. Doing so will result in a failing grade (whether the entire paper, a paragraph, or even a sentence is plagiarized) with no opportunity to make up the assignment.

In general, the process involves the following steps:

Take good notes as you watch the program. It's a good idea to leave spaces between notes so that you can edit or respond to them later.

Record your reactions. Do you agree or disagree with the points you have listed in your notes?

Jot down your questions, criticisms, and analyses of these points.

Review the notes and decide what main issue or topic raised in the report you would like to focus on.

Write down a series of questions you have about the main issue or topic you chose to focus on. (Some of you will have already recorded these questions while you were taking notes.) Select the question that most interests you, and answer it. Your answer should be the basis for formulating a strong thesis statement. (Occasionally the thesis might remain in the form of a question, and in some cases it may only be implied. See "Thesis Placement" under Organizing Your Response below.)

From your notes, select the key points that relate to your thesis and that you will focus on in the body of the paper. These will be your topic sentences. Often, you can develop topic sentences out of the list of questions you made but did not select as the basis of your thesis. Or you can make a new list of questions based on your thesis. Again, answer those questions, converting them into statements which you then can organize into topic sentences for each paragraph. You may also use questions as topic sentences but be judicious in your use of them. If every paragraph began with a question, the effect could be monotonous.

Develop your ideas in each paragraph by adding examples, quotations, and details from your notes.

Never use quotations without a signal phrase. All quotations in an academic paper must be introduced or placed in context through some statement, however brief, that identifies their source and/or explains how they are relevant to the point you are trying to make. The use of signal phrases and other forms of in-text citation will be covered in class.

Remember to organize your points from least to most important. Beginning with the most important or interesting point or argument in a paper discourages the reader from completing the essay and undercuts the effectiveness of your argument.

Make sure that the first sentence of a paragraph suggests a logical continuation of the discussion from the previous paragraph. In other words, use transitions.

Again check your thesis and make sure the topic sentence of each paragraph supports it.
More on Organizing Your Response

There are two ways you can approach this paper: (1) by blending narrative, analysis, and argumentation, or (2) by using a conventional approach, sticking to straight analysis and argumentation.

Blending Analysis/Argumentation with Narration

Some of you will want to emulate the techniques used by professional writers by first introducing your subject through an interesting vignette or personal narrative, even weaving a narrative throughout the paper. A short personal narrative might also make for an interesting conclusion. These kinds of personal responses, as explanation for your interest in or familiarity with the subject of the documentary, should enliven the paper, principally by inviting the reader to make a similar connection to the subject. So include this kind of information only if it adds depth to the paper. Remember that the purpose of this paper is to investigate and analyze your subject. Papers that merely recount a personal experience related to the subject will not receive passing grades.

Thesis Placement

If you begin with a personal narrative, you will probably delay stating your thesis until the end of the narrative. If not, most often the thesis should be clearly stated at the end of the introduction, usually the first paragraph. But there may be good reason not to follow this convention. Even in a strictly analytical paper, you might not state the thesis explicitly until near the end of the paper. If so, you have probably decided that your argument will be more persuasive to the reader if you present all your facts before stating your conclusion. On the other hand, some of you might decide that an implied thesis is actually more effective than a clear statement of the position you've taken on your subject. In these cases, you must be a very strong and organized writer in order not to go off topic or otherwise lose control of your argument. (Be sure to also read the section titled "Objective/Analytical and Personal Responses" at the end of this instruction sheet.)

Conventional Approach

The following information provides a basic approach to the assignment, including placement of the thesis early in the paper. No matter what approach you take to the assignment, do not forget to mention the title and subject of the documentary, and the date it aired.

Introduction, body, and conclusion

The introduction should contain all the basic information in one or two paragraphs and include a concise, one sentence, focused statement of your reaction or response to the video – your thesis. You might want to break down the organization of the introduction according to the following model for a one-paragraph introduction:

Sentence 1: This sentence should give the title of the Frontline report, the subject of the report if it is not clear from the title, and the date it aired. (Normally this sentence would include title, author, and title of the publication it appeared in if you were writing a response to a published paper, essay, or other written source).

Sentences 2, 3, and sometimes 4: These sentences give a brief summary of what you heard and saw.

Sentence 5: This sentence is your thesis statement. You agree, disagree, identify, or evaluate.

The body should of course contain paragraphs that provide support for your thesis. Do not therefore include information about the report that is extraneous to your thesis. Each paragraph should contain one idea. Topic sentences should support the thesis, and the final sentence of each paragraph should lead into the next paragraph.

For a sample introductory paragraph, see the attachment below titled "Analytical Response to a Documentary--First Paragraph."

Objective/Analytical and Personal Responses

The bulk of your paper must be an objective, critical analysis of the documentary. However, at appropriate points you may inject personal experience into the paper as professional journalists and essayists often do.

If you are not yet sure you want to include this kind of material in the final draft, but are considering it and would like my feedback, write a short personal response or narrative of one or two paragraphs and make an appointment to discuss it with me.

As I mentioned earlier, when written in the form of a narrative, a personal response can be used either as an introduction or conclusion in your final draft, or it can be interspersed at strategic points throughout the paper.

Works Cited

A Works Cited page is not required for this assignment although you may include one if you like. (A Works Cited list is normally attached as a separate page at the end of a research paper to give credit to any sources consulted and used in the paper.) MLA citation guidelines are available online at <http://www.roanestate.edu/owl/MLACitations.htm> or in your handbook.