GUIDELINES

An interpretation that makes sense of the texts

The goal of your paper is to add to our understanding and appreciation of ancient Greek texts. This does not mean that I like to hear the Presocratics praised and dislike hearing them criticized. In fact, your paper should not waste time with easy accolades (“Anaximander’s conception of the universe is amazingly advanced and an important addition to the understanding of earlier ages”) or easy criticisms (“Heraclitus contradicts himself when he says that night and day are the same”). The problem with either way is that it is too easy and short-circuits the harder work of understanding and interpreting. If you think you see a problem, inconsistency, or deficiency, your first task as an interpreter is to try to resolve it. It is usually safer to assume that you have not worked hard enough at understanding a writer’s thinking, than that the writer has obviously and obliviously failed to understand the implications of his own ideas.

Creating and discharging the burden of argument

Your paper should have a clear thesis, supported by a good argument based on the specific details of the texts. Your thesis is only worth arguing if it is not the only plausible truth about the texts. You have to go beyond the obvious to achieve an original interpretation. On the other hand, you have to limit yourself to what you can support by argument—your interpretation’s originality counts for little or nothing if it is so outlandish or speculative that you can’t explain to the reader how there are sound reasons for agreeing with your reading of the texts.

I call this the “burden of argument,” and your paper will be judged on how well it creates and discharges this burden: that is, by how necessary and convincing your arguments are towards establishing your conclusions.

Putting the burden on the argument means that every sentence, paragraph, and page should clearly communicate to the reader how it serves and advances the argument. Notice that, in this kind of writing, the burden is not on the evidence alone, but on how you argue for the significance of details, echoes, logical structures, difficulties, literary techniques, etc. If your evidence “speaks for itself” (that is, simply quoting the texts seems to prove your point), then the point you are making does not put the burden on the argument—find a better point that does.

Just because your thesis should require you to argue for it, this does not mean that you should try for as bold a thesis as possible and argue for it as zealously as possible. You are not writing a legal brief, so the success of your argument is not helped by arguing your thesis partially and excluding opposing possibilities. Rather, if you can come up with any good objections to your thesis, work at resolving them, and restate your thesis so as to do better justice to the complexity of the texts! An interpretation (unlike a legal brief) is always stronger if it takes account of all the sides and complexities of the issue it’s trying to illuminate.
Keeping to the point

Discharging the burden of argument, as discussed above, must be the focus of every sentence in your paper. Generalities that are unsupported by a text-based argument must not be included in your paper (except possibly a couple of sentences in the conclusion, if you are particularly fond of them). Also, remember that you are writing for an audience that has read all of the assigned course readings and basically understood them all. Therefore, there is no need to summarize the texts. Skip over what your audience already knows, and begin your paper immediately with the original claims of your interpretation, which will require the support of your argument in order to make sense to your reader and win their acceptance.

This will probably mean careful editing and revision of your early drafts in order to delete superfluous material that is not directly contributing to the clarity and cogency of your argument.

This requirement trumps the length requirement: that is, a 1500-word paper of which one half is introduction, summary, generalization, and speculation will be looked upon less kindly than a 950-word paper that is to the point. (Of course, your paper should be of the assigned length and to the point!)

Length and formatting

The paper should be typed, double-spaced, and 4-5 pp. in length (approximately 1200-1500 words). When you are finished, have your word processor count the words, and include the word count at the end on a separate line. For example:
1466 words

References to primary texts

Since everything you say in your paper should be an interpretation of the specific content and form of the primary texts (rather than a general or speculative response to them), it is important to cite the primary texts in a manner that is consistent and helpful to the reader.

All references to the texts, whether directly quoted or not, must be properly cited:

- Refer to Hesiod by abbreviated poem name and line number (Th. 754, WD 496).
- Refer to Presocratics by McKirahan’s boldface-number and page number (7.17, p. 65).
  - Use line numbers to cite from longer poem fragments (11.8, lines 37-39, p. 154).
- Usually the author’s name should be clear to your reader from the context; if not, include it (Parm. 11.7, p. 153; Anaximenes 6.8, p. 55; Hes. Th. 754).

Verse quotations of two whole lines or longer, and prose quotations longer than three lines, should be indented and single-spaced. If your paper includes longer quotations, its total length should be correspondingly greater. In general, you should not be relying on quotations to prove your point; rather, you should be using the specific details of the text as a point of departure for an interpretative argument. Therefore, you will tend to use shorter quotations as a rule.
References to secondary texts

There should be few or none of these, since the assignment is to base your argument directly on the primary texts. However, it is absolutely necessary to cite clearly and specifically (by page number) anything you have read which has contributed in any way to what you have written. Failure to do so is plagiarism and will result in consequences ranging from failure of this course to expulsion from college.

Since you are not asked to consult additional secondary sources, any secondary references are likely to be to the course textbooks, especially McKirahan. (For the same reason, to avoid trouble and doubt, if you have consulted sources not assigned, let me know and double-check with me your assumptions about whether you have cited them adequately.) You should not base your argument on McKirahan, since he is simply basing his commentary on the same primary sources to which you have full access. Only when McKirahan provides historical or linguistic facts, might you want to use his commentary in the construction of your own interpretation.

On the other hand, because you have read McKirahan’s commentary and used his edition, it is difficult to escape his influence, and you must be careful to credit this influence when it occurs. (Note that you should not even take McKirahan’s ordering of the texts for granted—if your argument requires you to classify the texts, you should do so according to your own reading of them.) Don’t get distracted supporting or opposing McKirahan’s views, in any case. Your goal is to show your reader that you have had a thoughtful encounter with the primary texts and can add to our understanding and appreciation of them.

Get the help you need

While I don’t mind participating in your brainstorming if you come to see me in person, I can be most useful to you when you are facing the specific questions and problems that come up when you set about trying to make sense of the reading, sharpen your thesis into something ambitious enough to create the burden of argument, and argue your points carefully. If your questions are specific enough, I may be able to be helpful even by email. (A good general test for sending your professors questions by email is this: make sure you have put as much work into your question as you expect them to put into the answer.)

Help is also available from the Writing Center. Some of the Writing Center’s tutors have specific interests and qualifications in writing about literary and philosophical texts based on close reading, so that you can work with someone who will readily understand the guidelines of this assignment. For more: http://www.union.edu/RESOURCES/LANGWRIT/WRITEING/

Due date

The paper is due Wednesday, April 26 (at the beginning of class). Late work is acceptable only for a very compelling reason beyond your control, if you secure my agreement in advance. Any partial credit for late work is at my discretion.
SUGGESTED TOPICS

1. For all of the abstraction of Parmenides’ thinking, he was influenced by the physical theories developed by the earlier tradition of Ionian science. How has he adopted and adapted, specifically, the ideas and expressions of Anaximander and Anaximenes? Your first step in preparing to write this paper is to collect and assess the evidence for such adaptations. However, this is not what you should put into the paper—that would be in danger of being a summary or a list. To start writing your paper, develop a thesis that will help provide an organized account of how and why Parmenides used his Ionian predecessors as he did. (To encourage yourself in close reading bear in mind that, while many small or accidental similarities may not be valid evidence for an intellectual influence, they may still help you develop an intelligent picture of the patterns of difference: what defines a typical difference in perspective, purpose, etc., between Parmenides and the two Milesians you’re considering.)

2. (Read Topic #1 carefully, since most of it applies.) Consider the same questions of adaptations and patterns of difference as they apply to either
   (A) Anaximander and Anaximenes’ relation to Hesiodic poetry; or
   (B) Parmenides’ relation to Hesiodic poetry.
For topic (B), the “Catalog of Hesiodic Echoes in Parmenides’ Poem,” posted to the course web page, is very useful, although it should not be substituted for your own searching and thinking!

3. Focus entirely on a close reading of the surviving fragments of Parmenides’ poem. Taking your cue from the close reading methods we began to apply to Parmenides in class, make your own original connections between Parmenidean passages that are not obviously related to each other, and develop a thesis that makes an original claim about Parmenides’ way of thinking and/or his way of explaining: for example (these are only examples!),
   • the significance of surprising turns in the logical structure and implications of his arguments
   • what is added to his thought by the way he compromises between the extreme abstraction of his subject matter and the need to talk about it by way of analogies, etc.
   • the complex language, combining intellectual, sensory, and other kinds of terms, with which Parmenides’ talks about how human beings grasp both Being and Seeming