First Short Paper

Length and due date:
The first 400-word paper, on *Oedipus the King* or *Oedipus at Colonus*, is due in class on Wednesday, January 14.

Formatting:
No title page is necessary; simply put the paper’s title (underlined) and your name at the beginning. (Be sure to use the title to suggest what is going to be interesting about your argument.) The paper must be double spaced, clearly legible, printed on only one side of each sheet of paper, and stapled. At the end of the paper, add an indication of the paper’s length in words (e.g., “419 words”). Most word processing software will perform this count for you. For example, in Microsoft Word, choose File/Properties/Statistics.

What to aim for:
Choose a short passage (approximately 10 lines) whose form of expression is challenging or poetically complex enough that it is not obvious how it should be interpreted. How does what this passage means depend on how it is expressed? Through a detailed look at your passage, explain what is added to its meaning, and the meaning of the drama in which it occurs, by the way Sophocles has deployed his literary art. What might a casual reader fail to appreciate about the imagery and metaphors; the dramatic situation, tone, and rhetoric; or the style, structure, repetitions, and timing?

What you argue is going on in your passage should not be the mere emphasis or highlighting of a major or evident theme of the drama. (Avoid “proving” anything that could go on the blurb on the back of the book.) Instead, help the readers understand the ins and outs of Sophocles’ distinctive and imaginative poetic way of using language on the stage. By exploring the specifics of Sophocles’ language, you will be able to complicate our understanding of what effects the play is achieving, and how.

The work of the paper is not in finding the right passage but in interpreting it. A good paper will not offer a passage as proof of the play’s concerns (thus making it the end-point of the “argument” and reducing it to a mere example) but will use it as the point of departure for an original explanation of the passage. In this paper you are making several points about one passage (rather than papers you may have written whose purpose is to make one central point and find several examples supporting it).

The key to these short papers is to focus on the essentials of your argument. If a paper of this length spends time on generalization or summary, it will simply not have room left over to offer a close reading of the text. You will be graded, not on how sweeping and important your thesis is, but on whether you have produced an original and plausible interpretation of your passage that goes beyond the obvious.
A rule of thumb: Avoid assertions about “the Greeks,” society, etc. These are unlikely to be persuasive or relevant. The texts offer us the basis for much more interesting claims about the relationships and values **as they are specifically imagined in the text.** All the texts we read in this course, even (perhaps especially!) the “non-fiction” texts, were written in order to mold the subject matter according to the author’s own imagination or agenda. We lose access to this dimension if we suppose that what we read in the texts is merely typical of the civilization that produced them.

Another rule of thumb: Some amount of intersection with our in-class discussions may be inevitable. But be sure to seek out new passages and go beyond our in-class argument whenever this happens.

**Examples of the kinds of topics you might pursue in writing about Oedipus the King:**
- the images of disease and disordered nature
- the non-literal use of the language of parentage and blood-relation
- the language humans use in speaking (and disagreeing) about how they make judgments in a world where appearances are often false
- how exits, entrances, and on-stage silences complicate the drama’s meaning
- in what ways Oedipus’ transformation by blinding himself is not adequately understood as self-punishment
- the language, rhetoric, and drama of visual spectacle as a means of conveying wisdom or truth
- the complexities and contradictions in Oedipus’ possessiveness
- ways in which aspects of the life-philosophy that Oedipus followed when he was ignorant about himself may not have been totally discredited by his catastrophe
- the indirect way a choral song responds poetically to the drama

**Plagiarism:**
The use of outside sources is **discouraged.** Any sources you consult in preparing your paper should be cited in a way that makes clear exactly what influence they have had on your selection of material and the development of your argument. This includes introductions and editorial matter in the assigned books. Consult the syllabus and your copy of *Sources, Their Use and Acknowledgement,* and bring any questions about the use of sources directly to me before handing in your work. A failing grade is the minimum consequence for plagiarism.

**Contacting me:**
Please feel free to consult with me at any stage of the writing process. I can probably help you the most when you have developed specific ideas to pursue in your paper.

- **Email** tarik.wareh@dartmouth.edu
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What is a thesis?

For the shorter papers, you need not begin with a thesis. As explained below, the thinking and analysis process is often more productive when it begins with a challenging text, not a thesis. You may wait until the end of the short paper to articulate in a (possibly tentative or complicated) thesis statement what deeper understanding of the passage you’ve arrived at. If you do eventually state a thesis at the beginning of your paper, it should be the result of this same process, not its starting point.

A very useful idea to apply in framing your argument is the burden of proof. It is essential that your thesis place the burden of proof on you. A good thesis will not seem perfectly correct and sound when first encountered at the beginning of your paper; it will require you to work hard and carefully in order to argue that your way of reading the text is well-founded and enriches our understanding of the drama. In an exercise (which we may repeat later this term) I have asked students to make two lists of possible theses about a literary text—one list of theses that were serious and supportable, and another list of “fantasy” theses that might be wildly counterintuitive but which would definitely place a large burden of proof on the author’s argument. It turned out that many of the theses on the second list were more interesting to pursue in a paper than the ones on the first list. The lesson to be drawn from this is not to start the writing process by deciding on a thesis—if you haven’t done the work of close analysis, the thesis will not be interesting or complex enough. Rather, choose a passage that interests you and leave your imagination open to the directions in which an argument might take its interpretation.

Especially in longer papers, when you are bringing together multiple passages, keep your eyes open for what is unexpected about the meaning of a passage. For example, how are two passages apparently on the same subject, or using the same rhetoric, in fact in tension with each other? Or how is it that two seemingly unrelated passages can in fact be understood better when considered in connection with each other? These are examples of problems of literary interpretation that place the burden of proof on the writer.

While I am encouraging boldness, don’t confuse this with over-simplification. The point is not to force an extreme interpretation on the text. Papers are usually better, not worse, if they recognize points whose interpretation could go two ways and, instead of sweeping contradictory possibilities under the rug, explain the difficulties and try to incorporate the complexities and ambiguities into the argument about the passage’s meaning.