

Great Questions and the Liberal Arts

Spring 2008

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Arts and Letters 43002 01

This two-credit course, designed primarily for graduating seniors, will revisit and expand some of the great questions explored in the College Seminar on “Faith, Doubt, and Reason.” It will also expand the range of great questions considered by students and will encourage broad reflection on the value of a liberal arts education. The course will be student centered, with considerable focus on discussion. Readings in the humanities will be taken from authors such as Plato, Goethe, Hegel, Kafka, and Benedict. Readings from the social sciences will be taken from works by writers such as Neil Postman, Christian Smith, and Richard Light. The arts will be included via a campus performance of Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus*; films by directors such as Alfred Hitchcock, John Ford, and Woody Allen; and engagement with the works of a contemporary painter, Maria Tomasula

Learning Goals

- 1) Students will become more versed at identifying and asking those searching questions—perennial, contemporary, or personal—that give meaning to life, with a particular emphasis on questions related to faith, doubt, and reason and the value of the liberal arts.
- 2) Students will recognize the diversity of ways in which the various divisions of the College—the arts, the humanities, and the social sciences—approach great questions, and they will advance their skills in evaluating the tenability of various kinds of arguments.
- 3) Students will gain insight into a selection of classical and contemporary works and will advance their skills in interpreting cultural documents, e.g., in asking pertinent and interesting questions of works and arguing for and against various interpretations.
- 4) Students will learn to become more adept in intellectual discussion, improving their capacity for empathetic and thoughtful listening as well as for articulate precision and persuasive argument; they will also discover how much they are able to learn from one another.
- 5) Students will advance in their mastery of the English language, both spoken and written, and they will improve their basic communication skills insofar as they accompany the organization and communication of their thoughts.
- 6) Students will develop their own positions on central questions of the course, and they will be able to describe them and defend them in the light of alternative positions. They will become more articulate in speaking about their own faith and the complexities of faith, doubt, and reason. At the same time, they will become more conscious of the mysterious and inexhaustible nature of these categories. In relating to these issues in a personal way, they will also recognize a strong

relationship between their academic work and their personal lives.

7) Students will gain a richer sense of the value of a liberal arts education, including making the most of such an education and defending its value against critics. They will also learn to become better critics of less compelling realizations of the liberal arts ideal.

Class: Tuesdays from 9:15 to 10:45 a.m.; Location 119 O’Shaughnessy Hall

Office: 100 O’Shaughnessy Hall

Office Hours: after class; almost anytime by appointment (please contact Cindy Swonger at cswonger@nd.edu or 631-6642). Cindy knows that students have preferential scheduling, so she will seek to find a prompt meeting time even if my schedule is full. Impromptu meetings can also often be arranged before class.

Phone: (574) 631-6642 (office); (269) 683-8857 (home)

E-mail: mroche@nd.edu

Student Contributions to Learning

Prerequisites: previous experience in the College Seminar on “Faith, Doubt, and Reason” and a willingness to carry out the assignments below in order to engage deeply the meaningful and profound questions of the course and to meet or exceed the learning goals.

1) **Class Contribution:** 45%;

Students will be expected to contribute regularly to discussion and to adopt various facilitative roles during the semester, including leading or co-leading class discussions. Class contribution is not equivalent with the quantity of class participation; instead both quantity and quality will be considered. Feedback, including suggestions for improvement, will be given to students during the semester. Because student learning is aided by active student participation in the classroom, students will want to prepare well and contribute regularly and meaningfully to group discussions.

2) **Regular Assignments:** 25%;

On a regular basis, assignments will be given in which students practice their capacity for oral expression, for example, by conducting an oral interview, by engaging in a group discussion outside of class, or by analyzing a videotape of their own oral performance. Assignments will also involve answering central questions on the readings. These assignments will be designed not only to aid understanding but also to help initiate and facilitate discussion. Some of the questions will be focused on the texts; others will go beyond the texts and invite students to develop their

own thinking on the subject. The total number of obligatory written assignments will be approximately 15. Each assignment is expected to be approximately one page (double-spaced), with a font size of 12; it should not be more than 1½ pages. In addition, at least two optional assignments will be offered as possible substitutions or as possible extra credit. Students taking the course pass/fail will be required to complete satisfactorily at least two-thirds of the written assignments.

You will also be asked to play a leading role in some of the discussions and may in that context be assigning study questions to your colleagues.

At one point well into the semester I will ask you to share some peer evaluations with one another. I will ask you to identify one strength and one recommendation for each student in the class besides yourself.

Please note that at the end of the semester I will collect all of your short papers a second time. They will be returned to you after the grades are finalized.

3) Final Writing Assignment: 7.5%;

Each student will write an op-ed. For parameters, see below. Students should discuss the topic with me before spring break. I will be happy to comment on drafts submitted no later than April 22. Your op-eds are due at the time of our final examination, Wednesday, May 7, 10:30 to 12:30.

4) Final Oral Examination: 22.5%;

Each student will also have a final oral examination of 30-45 minutes. The examination will cover the entire course. The final oral examination may also include some questions on the topic of your paper. In addition, for the final examination, you are also to view Woody Allen's *Zelig* and come prepared to discuss it. Copies are available on reserve in the Hesburgh Library and at the reception in 100 O'Shaughnessy Hall.

Final oral examinations will be scheduled at your discretion between April 21 and May 9. Please contact Cindy Swonger at cswonger@nd.edu or 631-6642 to schedule your individual 45-minute slot. Everyone seeking an examination time before the scheduled date for our examination will receive one.

Books for Purchase

G. W. F. Hegel, *Introduction to the Philosophy of History* (Hackett)

Richard J. Light, *Making the Most of College* (Harvard)

Franz Kafka, *The Trial* (Schocken)

Christopher Marlowe, *Doctor Faustus* (Signet)

E-Reserves

Below is the link to the electronic reserves for this course:

https://www.library.nd.edu/reserves/ereserves/course.cgi?course=2008S_AL_43002_01

The materials can also be accessed by going to the University Libraries Website at <http://www.library.nd.edu/> and clicking on the Electronic Reserves link located under Library.

The following works are included in e-reserves:

Benedict XVI. "Belief in the World of Today." *Introduction to Christianity*. San Francisco: Ignatius, 2004: 39-81.

Smith, Christian, with Melinda Lundquist Denton. "God, Religion, Whatever: On Moralistic Therapeutic Deism." *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2005: 118-171.

Recommended Reading

Cook, Claire. *Line by Line: How to Edit Your Own Writing*. New York: Modern Language Association, 1985.

Strunk, William, Jr. and E. B. White. *The Elements of Style*. 4th ed. New York: Longman, 2000.

Calendar of Classes and Readings (with number of pages in parentheses)

January 15, 2008 Introduction

January 22, 2008 Hegel, pp. 3-82 (79)

A screening of *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* (123 minutes) is scheduled for Thursday, January 24, at 8:40 a.m. in 119 O'Shaughnessy Hall and again for Monday, January 28, at 9:00 p.m. in the Browning Cinema of the Marie P. DeBartolo Center for the Performing Arts. It is recommended that students view the film twice. Should you be unavailable for one of the two showings, you may want to view the copy that has been placed on reserve in the Hesburgh Library or the copy that is available for check-out from the Dean's Office receptionist, Linda Brady, in 100 O'Shaughnessy Hall.

January 29, 2008 John Ford, *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance*

February 5, 2008 Light, pp. 1-103 (103)

Please note that as part of the College's Films and Faith series, Akira Kurosawa's *Ikiru* (1952) is

being shown in the Browning Cinema of Marie P. DeBartolo Center for the Performing Arts on Sunday, February 10, at 4:00 p.m. *Ikiru* has echoes of the Faust theme.

February 12, 2008 Light, pp. 104-214 (110)

February 19, 2008 Roche, “Why Choose the Liberal Arts” (80)

Please note that the Maria Tomasula exhibit is open January 13 to March 2, 2008 in the Mestrovic Studio Gallery of the Snite Museum. Tomasula will speak about her paintings on Sunday, January 20, at 3:00 p.m.

February 26, 2008 “Rapture: Recent Paintings by Maria Tomasula”

March 4, 2008 Spring Break

Please note that we meet anomalously on a Thursday during the first week after break.

March 13, 2008 Kafka, pp. 3-110 (107)

March 18, 2008 Kafka, pp. 111-231 (120)

A screening of *Shadow of a Doubt* (108 minutes) is scheduled for Thursday, March 20, at 9:00 a.m. in 119 O’Shaughnessy Hall. Because our discussion of *Shadow of a Doubt* takes place after Easter Monday, when the University is closed, you will want to orchestrate a second showing of the film in the dorms, or, if you prefer, we can seek a showing on Wednesday evening and meet that week on Thursday. A copy of the film has also been placed on reserve in the Library, and another copy is available in 100 O’Shaughnessy Hall.

March 25, 2008 Alfred Hitchcock, *Shadow of a Doubt*

April 1, 2008 Smith (53)

April 8, 2008 Benedict (42)

Students will be expected to attend a performance of Marlowe’s *Doctor Faustus* on Thursday, April 10, at 7:30 p.m., in the Decio Mainstage Theater. Tickets will be distributed at class on or before April 8. If you are unable to attend the performance on April 10, please contact Cindy Swonger at cswonger@nd.edu, and she will reserve a ticket for another performance.

April 15, 2008 Marlowe (80)

Students who would like feedback on their final written assignment may submit a draft on or before April 22.

April 22, 2006 Open

April 29, 2006 Open

We will discuss options for the two open sessions. Options include, among others:

Goethe, *Faust I* (two sessions);
Büchner, *Lenz* (one session);
Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death* (one or two sessions);
Allen, *Zelig* (one session);
a session on the op-eds (one session);
a session on religion and politics in the context of the 2008 election (one session)
a recent essay (2007) by Vittorio Hösle on the role of reason in religion (one session);
revisiting Plato's *Euthyphro* (one session).

We may decide to spend more time with one work or another. Should this occur, we will cut elsewhere. However, we shall do our best to keep to the schedule.

We will try to find a day when everyone can come to my home for dinner. In addition, several times during the semester I would like to join smaller groups of 3-5 students for lunch in one of the residence hall cafeterias.

Policy on Attendance

One unexcused absence will be integrated into the class contribution grade. Two unexcused absences will lead to the reduction of the final grade by one partial unit, for example, from a B to a B-. Three unexcused absences will lead to the reduction of the final grade by two partial units. More than three unexcused absences will lead to failure of the course.

In the unlikely event that a student misses a scheduled oral examination without having a legitimate excuse, a make-up examination will be arranged, but the student's grade will be dropped by one partial unit.

Assessment Guidelines

Criteria for Grading Class Contribution

Criteria for a Grade of B

The student ...

prepares well for each class by completing all assignments; rereading or reviewing, when appropriate; making appropriate notes; and discussing the works outside the class with

students from the class and students and others not from the class;
makes contributions that show thorough familiarity with the assigned reading and thoughtful reflection on the material;
asks good, searching questions that spark discussion;
listens well and participates in the give-and-take of discussion, for example, by asking clarifying questions of other students, offering evidence to support positions, or proposing alternative perspectives;
is willing to engage an issue from multiple points of view;
is able to make connections across the works of the semester;
can draw interesting comparisons;
is willing to draw on real-world observation and personal experience as well as scholarly authorities;
can recognize strengths and weaknesses in an argument;
demonstrates the capacity to think on his or her feet;
is willing to think through an idea even when it is in the end abandoned;
is willing to recognize, investigate, and, where appropriate, question his or her own assumptions and accepted ideas and develop alternative positions;
shows the humility to withdraw an idea from discussion in the face of decisive counter-arguments;
exhibits the confidence to retain a position when counter-arguments fail;
speaks with clarity and engagement;
is able to marshal evidence in favor of a position;
helps the group explore one aspect thoroughly, but then can also move on to the next topic when appropriate;
is more interested in the group dynamic of truth seeking through dialogue than in demonstrating his or her own excellence;
exhibits respect, tact, and diplomacy in debate with others.

Criteria for a Grade of A

The student does all of the above and ...

ensures that the group discussion flourishes at the most demanding, and yet also most playful level, helps the entire group find the balance between being alert and being relaxed;
finds and develops meaningful threads, so that the discussion, instead of being haphazard, reaches previously unexplored heights;
exhibits intellectual hospitality, effectively encouraging the participation of others and successfully drawing good ideas out of others;
gives unusually deep and rich responses to interpretive and searching questions;
consistently links the discussion to earlier works and themes as well as issues of existential interest;
helps guide the discussion through occasional summaries and substantial, thoughtful queries that

build on earlier comments;
keeps the discussion on track while also encouraging creative leaps and risk-taking, including the development of new insights and perspectives;
asks fascinating and unexpected questions;
exhibits substantial curiosity and creativity and a love of the life of the mind;
brings forth sparkling and deep insights without dominating the discussion;
exhibits a searching mind, the mind of a developing intellectual;
uses increasingly eloquent and elegant language.

Criteria for a Grade of C

The student ...

comes prepared to class;
occasionally contributes isolated, but thoughtful comments to the discussion;
makes comments that are backed with evidence;
discerns the difference between more relevant and less relevant comments;
understands his or her own assumptions and is willing to question them;
exhibits respect for others and treats all persons with dignity;
seeks truth through dialogue.

Criteria for a Grade of D

The student ...

comes to class, but rarely contributes to the discussion;
makes comments that are without evidence;
makes irrelevant comments and has difficulties contributing to the flow of the conversation;
has little, if any, awareness of his or her biases, prejudices, and assumptions.

Criteria for a Grade of F

The student ...

does not speak at all or makes comments that exhibit a lack of preparation;
disturbs, rather than enhances, the conversation with irrelevant patters;
has no awareness of his or her biases, prejudices, and assumptions;
exhibits little or no respect for the class and its search for truth.

Criteria for Grading Short Papers

Criteria for a Grade of Check

The paper is written clearly. The language is well-chosen, the essay reads smoothly, and the writer avoids grammatical errors. The essay has very few, if any, awkward or wordy stylistic constructions. The paper satisfactorily addresses the question chosen and does so with some level of sophistication and nuance. The response is structured coherently; paragraphs flow appropriately, one to the other.

Criteria for a Grade of Check Plus

The paper integrates the expectations of a B grade, but is in addition unusually thoughtful, deep, creative, and far-reaching in its analysis and evidence. Its language is elegant.

Criteria for a Grade of Check Minus

The assignment is not completed or is completed in a format that is clearly substandard. The essay exhibits little, if any, preparatory reflection or study. The thesis of the paper is missing, unclear, or overly simple. Ideas may be present but are not developed with any attention to detail or nuance. Paragraphs are poorly constructed and contain little supporting detail. Problems in grammar, spelling, or punctuation interfere with the writer's capacity to communicate.

Criteria for Grading Oral Examinations

Criteria for a Grade of B

The student knows the works in questions and is able to handle most questions, including questions that ask for analysis, comparison, and evaluation. The student exhibits the ability to handle unexpected and unpredictable questions. The student is able to link the meaning of the works to his or her own personal perspectives. The student is articulate and avoids filler words.

Criteria for a Grade of A

The student satisfies the expectations for a B grade. In addition, the student offers responses that are unusually thoughtful, deep, creative, and far-reaching in their analysis. The student speaks with eloquence and responds to even the most complex questions with nuance and sophistication.

Criteria for a Grade of C

The student is able to handle most questions, offering basic analyses, comparisons, and evaluations. The responses, while accurate, tend not to be as full as would be desirable. A few of the more difficult questions present modest difficulties. Filler words occasionally interfere with the responses.

Criteria for a Grade of D

The student handles some questions well, but struggles with others. The student tends to do well with simple informational questions, but struggles when analysis, comparison, and evaluation are involved. Filler words are common.

Criteria for a Grade of F

The student exhibits responses that manifest a lack of preparation or knowledge. In some cases, the student cannot answer questions in even a rudimentary way.

Criteria for Grading Op-eds

Criteria for a Grade of B

Topic

The student has identified a topic that engages a great question.

Clarity

The op-ed presents a clear, compelling, and challenging thesis.

Independence

The op-ed does not simply restate the obvious or repeat what others have said, but builds on what is known to exhibit the student's own thinking about the topic. The writer avoids simply paraphrasing the ideas of others. The student says something new.

Complexity

Multiple points of view are engaged, and the potential limits of one's own interpretation are acknowledged, either through the avoidance of overreaching or through the refutation of alternative arguments. The op-ed integrates a variety of connected themes and exhibits a curious mind at work.

Structure

The op-ed is fewer than 800 words. The introduction is inviting, with a strong first sentence. The thesis is stated within the first three paragraphs. The overall structure is logical and coherent, the organization makes sense, and the paragraphs flow appropriately, one to the other. The conclusion is powerful.

Evidence

Appropriate evidence is given for the op-ed's claims.

Style

The language is well-chosen, the op-ed reads smoothly, and the writer avoids grammatical errors. The essay has very few, if any, awkward or wordy stylistic constructions.

Potential

The op-ed reaches a level that would make it a likely candidate for publication in a local outlet.

Criteria for a Grade of A

The op-ed integrates the expectations of a B grade, but is in addition unusually thoughtful, deep, creative, and far-reaching in its analysis and evidence. Its language is elegant. The op-ed exhibits the potential for publication in a major outlet.

Criteria for a Grade of C

The claims are clear, and the op-ed takes a stand on a reasonably interesting issue. The writer exhibits some competence in exploring the subject. Most of the essay is well-organized, and the logic is for the most part clear and coherent. Some evidence is given for the points made. The language is understandable and free of extraneous material. The paper is without basic grammatical errors.

Criteria for a Grade of D

The thesis of the op-ed is missing, unclear, or overly simple. The structure is not readily apparent. Ideas are present but are not developed with any details, examples, or evidence. Paragraphs are poorly constructed and contain little supporting detail. Problems in grammar, spelling, or punctuation interfere with the writer's capacity to communicate.

Criteria for a Grade of F

The assignment is not completed or is completed in a format that is clearly substandard. The essay exhibits little, if any, preparatory reflection or study. It contains no serious ideas and lacks an argument as well as supporting evidence. The essay is difficult to read or comprehend. No meaningful structure is discernible. Sentences are very poorly written and riddled with grammatical mistakes.

Academic Code of Honor

This course will be conducted in accordance with the Academic Code of Honor of the University

of Notre Dame, which stipulates: “As a member of the Notre Dame community, I will not participate in or tolerate academic dishonesty.” The code is available at <http://www.nd.edu/~hnr/code/>. Information on citing sources is available at <http://www.nd.edu/~writing/resources/AvoidingPlagiarism.html>.

Students are encouraged to discuss readings with one another outside of the classroom and should feel free to discuss assignments with one another, but the source of all ideas must be revealed fully and honestly. Whenever information or insights are obtained from secondary works, students should cite their sources.

Students are encouraged to prepare for class discussions and for oral examinations by discussing the class content with one another outside the classroom. However, students are not permitted to discuss any aspect of the final oral examination with one another until all students have completed their examinations.

Useful Web Sites

<http://www.thearda.com>

American Religion Data Archive

<http://dictionary.reference.com>

Dictionary.com

<http://www.nd.edu/~faust/>

Faust at Notre Dame

www.idebate.org

International Debate Education Association (IDEA)

www.imdb.com

The Internet Movie Database

www.youthandreligion.org

National Study of Youth and Religion

<http://pewforum.org/>

The Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life

www.spirituality.ucla.edu

Spirituality in Higher Education

<http://plato.stanford.edu/>

Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy

<http://www.npr.org/thisibelieve/about.html>

This I Believe

www.toastmasters.org

Toastmasters International

<http://streaming.nd.edu/artsletters/saturday05/tomasula.wmv>

Vast: The Art of Maria Tomasula

<http://www.usccb.org/fb/vaticanfilms.htm>

Vatican Best Films List

Appendix 1: Leading a Discussion

Study Questions

You will be asked to lead the discussion usually together with one other person. Normally you will lead the discussion for almost the entire class, depending on the flow of the discussion. In leading a discussion, you will want to keep in mind that a good discussion is determined as much by the preparation of the discussants as it is by the actual dynamics at the time of the discussion.

To that end it is almost always important for students to have a few study questions that will help them focus their reflections on the material for discussion. You will want to speak with me about strategies in advance of your actual discussion date.

If you intend to offer study questions, please keep the following in mind. If you will be leading a Tuesday discussion, you should submit draft questions to me by Friday at noon. If you will be leading a Thursday discussion, you should submit draft questions to me by Monday at noon. Please send me your draft questions as an attached file in either word perfect or word. I may add a question or two or edit a question slightly, after which I will send the questions to the class. Often the list of questions will include a brief written assignment from me. Please do not prepare any more than ten study questions.

Discussion Format

A default form of discussion leadership is that two students lead the discussion, with study questions in advance. Your task would be to ask questions of the group; get them speaking, ideally to one another and not only through the discussion leaders; and ask appropriate follow-up questions or offer appropriate synthetic reflections that help to move the discussion forward.

However, multiple other strategies are possible.

You may wish to break the class into small groups for intensive discussion before opening the conversation to the wider group. This allows everyone to speak and also sharpens the contributions of students. In the past students have discovered that it is normally better for the small discussion groups to be addressing the same questions. Otherwise one falls into the trap of listening to presentations instead of engaging the class in discussion.

You may wish to consider orchestrating a debate. In such cases, your study questions should help students prepare for the debate. You may want to structure the debate so that if, say, two questions are debated, one group defends the author or work on one question and criticizes the author or work on a different question. Debates can also be more interpretive than evaluative in nature.

One of you might lead the discussion, and the other might play a special role, such as devil's advocate (the person listens carefully for any emerging consensus and then formulates and expresses a contrary view the group needs to counter, or the person listens carefully to challenge the group on its hidden assumptions, which need to be defended).

You could form a panel of two who present their ideas for about five to seven minutes each, followed by questions to the panelists, and then a wider discussion.

You could select a particular scene from a DVD and then focus discussion on that scene.

You could consider some role-playing, in which you play a character or an author or a director, and students must develop questions for you.

Please don't hesitate to draw on your creativity in trying to craft a meaningful format for engagement with the material.

Some Tips

Formulate questions that are open-ended, questions that encourage perception and analysis, not questions that lead to a one-word response or a simplistic right or wrong answer. However, a simple query of the whole class (for example, does the work define holiness?) can sometimes lead to meaningful follow-up questions.

Speak clearly and loudly.

Call on colleagues by their names.

Be willing to wait for a response. Give your colleagues time to think.

Don't hesitate to use the blackboard.

Show through your body language that you are listening and that you do not intend to speak until the person is finished speaking. Encourage speakers through your body language, such as, when relevant, by nodding in agreement.

If many persons want to speak, be alert to hands that are raised and the order in which they have been raised as well as the amount of speaking individual students have done thus far. Do not hesitate to say at a given point that now the floor is open only to those who have not yet spoken.

Try to build on the comments of students, or have other students build on the comments of other students. Make comments, for example, that underscore the links between two students' contributions. Make summary observations that take into account several people's contributions and that touch on a recurring theme in the discussion. One of your goals is to try to create a coherent discussion instead of fostering a set of isolated comments that simply follow one another without any organic connection.

One way to prepare is to anticipate in advance at least some of the comments that you might expect to hear. Come to class with a bag of ideas and dip into the bag, as needed, depending on what kinds of responses you receive. You will also need to come to class that day in a very alert mode, as much of what you will need to do is think on your feet.

Try to get different views on the table and try to delve into supporting arguments, including specific references to the work in question. Often a discussion is enhanced by specific references to the work.

Ask follow-up questions: To seek clarification, ask: What exactly do you mean when you say ... ? To push for supporting evidence, ask: Why do you think that is so? Where in the text do you find support for that view ... ? Can anyone else find evidence for that view? To encourage connections, ask: How does what you just said relate to ... ? To encourage more complex analysis, ask: Are there any counter-arguments to this position?

Encourage students to talk to one another, not to direct all responses to you. You might ask, who would like to respond to that point?

Do not hesitate to call on classmates, especially if you can build on statements they made earlier in the semester.

Your questions need not be restricted to the texts themselves. You should feel free also to use the texts to develop overarching reflections on great questions and the liberal arts.

You might also review the "Criteria for Grading Class Contribution," which have some implicit suggestions for what characterize good contributions and good discussions.

Consider strategies for closing the discussion. Do you want to summarize some major points? Do

you want to connect what has been discussed with earlier issues? Do you want to link the day's discussion with future topics yet to be explored?

Enjoy your time leading the discussion. You won't have this learning opportunity in every class.

Appendix 2: Writing an Op-ed

Your writing beyond college will involve many kinds of writing, including vision statements and positions paper for work, seminar papers for graduate classes, journal entries, letters, etc. One form of writing that would permit you to continue to engage the great questions would be writing op-eds for newspapers or magazines. Your final writing exercise in this class will be an op-ed.

General Parameters

Your goal should be to develop a compelling argument on a great question, be it a perennial question or a particularly timely question. You should seek to identify a topic that interests people and on which you have an engaging perspective.

It could be a question that may resurface in the news in the coming months or years; it need not be the kind of op-ed that would be printed tomorrow. When it would be time to submit the piece, however, it would need to tie in to some kind of news event. That might mean writing a certain kind of perennial piece and then waiting for a catalyst to make its eventual submission timely.

An op-ed should be in the range of 700-750 words.

Stylistic Parameters

You should offer a clear case, with the import of the op-ed stated crisply.

The thesis might be of many kinds, but a very common structure is one of the following: X is or is not so ... or X is not good or worthy ... or X should or should not be done ... or X will or will not happen (as a consequence of something else).

Your thesis should challenge a reader's thinking.

Be sure to have either a short first sentence or at least a crisp first sentence.

State your thesis early, at least within the first three paragraphs.

Be bold, not tepid, in your claims, and be sure that you have a claim, not simply a set of reflections.

Be sure to have some kind of evidence—be it arguments, historical examples, statistics, facts, or

authoritative quotes. If you need an authoritative quote, call someone up and ask them for a quote. New evidence, not readily apparent to others, is particularly compelling, as is a counter-intuitive idea.

Personal experience can be persuasive.

Try to give some personal voice, a sense of personality, to your piece.

Be sure to have a good closer, a superb final line.

Conclude with a short self-description (no more than 25 words).

Strategies to Avoid

Any text over 800 words will not be accepted.

Your goal is to make a case in a compelling and aesthetically pleasing way, not to demonstrate how smart you are.