

Essay 3: What's Past Is Prologue

Over the past two decades, K-12 schools, colleges, and universities have increasingly shifted funding away from the arts and humanities to support STEM and pre-professional programs. In short, schools increasingly spend money on programs that they believe are most likely to produce money. Yet, proponents of the arts and humanities argue that this investment is short-sighted: Study of the arts and humanities stimulates creativity, problem-solving, and emphasizes the importance of considering ideas and actions in a broad context, viewed through multiple perspectives. This is particularly valuable when navigating the diverse, dynamic, and often disorienting landscape of 21st-century American culture.

Taken from Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, the phrase "what's past is prologue" means that what has happened in the past serves as a prologue—a setting for (or setting up of)—the action that happens afterward. This term, we have read a number of texts from the years that formed the "prologue" for contemporary American society. This final writing project invites you to consider the relationship between past and future, and advocate for the importance of reading early American literature.

You should choose a contemporary issue in American society. This issue might be a problem, a political movement, or a public policy. After researching that issue, you should then consider how one or more of the literary texts that we have read this semester can create a deeper understanding of your chosen issue. In other words, your paper will answer the question: How does reading literature from our past help us to better understand [your chosen issue] in the present? You are encouraged to draw upon post-colonial theory to help frame your analysis.

Your essay should:

- Present a research-informed analysis of the contemporary issue. You may use any relevant combination of evidence to build this analysis, including newspaper articles or news footage, documentaries, journal articles, or creative works.
- Analyze that contemporary issue in relation to at least one of the literary texts we have read this semester. Your analysis should include substantive discussion of the literary text, supported by textual evidence (e.g., quotations from the text).
- Unite your analysis of the temporary issue and the literary text with a thesis that explains how the literary text serves as evidence of a prologue to the present issue.

This essay should be approximately 1,500-2,000 words in length, using MLA guidelines for document formatting and citation style. You must use at least two sources located through the library databases, in addition to the literary text(s) that you are discussing. You may also use any of the supplemental resources included in the course folders (online archives, documentaries, lectures, etc.).

If you would like instructor feedback on your essay, you should submit a preliminary draft by 11:59 p.m. on Wednesday, December 1. Submitting a preliminary draft is optional.

The essay is due for grading week 11:59 p.m. on Wednesday, December 15. This essay serves as the final assignment for this course.

The research paper will be based on the following criteria:

Development of Ideas

- Does the essay respond appropriately to the assignment?
- Does the essay fully develop a central argument or engage in consideration of a central question?
- Are supporting points fully explained and supported with evidence and reasoning?
- Does the analysis of the topic help readers to understand or think about the topic in a new way?

Use of Evidence

- Are sources effectively used in the essay to support the essay's claims?
- Are sources fully explained?
- Are connections between sources and the claims they are supporting clear?
- Are sources properly credited using MLA format for citation?

Organization

- Does the essay have a clear thesis statement?
- Are paragraphs organized in support of a single idea?
- Is there a clear connection between each paragraph and the thesis statement?
- Is there a logical pattern of development in support of the thesis?
- Are there clear transitions between ideas?

Mechanics and Usage

- Does the essay use a variety of sentence lengths and structures to create sentence fluency?
- Does the essay use effective diction?
- Does the essay avoid errors in grammar and syntax (particularly those we have covered in class)?
- Is the essay formatted in MLA document style?

Possible Topics

This list is suggestive rather than prescriptive; feel free to choose a topic within the parameters for the assignment that is not on this list.

Wage disparities (race/sex)

Child care

Voting rights

Education/school disparities (race/sex) (the podcast series *Nice White Parents* is a good resource)

#MeToo

Black Lives Matter

Standing Rock/Indigenous American land rights

MAGA

Art as resistance (check out the KHC's exhibit *Survivance and Sovereignty on Turtle Island*)

1619 Project (you are encouraged to check the podcast series *1619*)

1776 Commission

Immigration

Prison/crime/policing