

2202234 Introduction to the Study of English Literature
Semester I, 2020
Monday, October 26, 2020
Handout: Argument and Writing

Here is an exercise in developing an argument that you can try. The same skills apply to coming up with an idea for a reading response, an exam essay, or a class paper. For this activity you can get into groups to study the text, brainstorm ideas, and develop a thesis. Let's take family as a topic.¹

- 1). First ask yourselves some progressively specific questions about family, such as how does family figure in the play, that is, how is it portrayed, what is its function in the work, is it described in any consistent way? How does it relate to other things, themes or literary elements (popularity, profession, class, education, life, desire, achievement, justice, looking and seeing, time, characters, setting)?
- 2). Next you'll want to read closely passages or lines that reveal something about these relationships. You might focus on the performance passage of troupes 1 and 2. ("they *won't* publish a photo of that kid" (69) to "doesn't Uncle Bill seem less steady?" (70)
- 3). Now, make a list of as many observations as you can about the language of this passage, grouping them into these preliminary categories:
 - a. Evidence suggesting a link between family and other things.
 - b. Evidence suggesting a contradiction or conflict between the nature or character of different things.
 - c. Things in the text that seem unrelated to family.
- 4). With these observations in mind, reconsider your original questions in 1). Reformulate your question in more specific terms. Don't feel bound to keep key terms or topics if your discussion and analysis lead you to a different concern. At this point, you might shift focus from "family" to "context," for example. A form of this question may eventually be useful in helping to structure and write your introduction.
- 5). Now, re-examine your observations in 3) and begin to organize the meat of your argument. Give special scrutiny to those items in list c. that seemed unrelated to family. Sometimes these incongruities serve as a compelling way into the heart of the issue. Start with an obvious statement but then tease out the implications of each detail in that statement. Be thorough and creative.
- 6). Now that you have demonstrated the connections as you see them, for a conclusion, do not merely agree or disagree with the initial rewritten question. Instead, discuss the nuances raised by the question, or how the question was even wrong-headed in its formulation, or lay out the details of why the question is a good or bad one for you to have asked. Here, you can link evidence from 5), which is the core of your argument and findings, to your final impressions of the issue and the text.

¹ Adapted from Anne Fernald's *Emma: Developing an Argument* exercise handout (1993)