

Guidelines for Writing the Junior Essay in English

The junior tutorial in English culminates in the junior essay, a 20-page (or so) work of research and criticism. This guide addresses junior essay writers. It details the major steps in the process of writing the junior essay—from prospectus through final submission—with an emphasis on why they matter and how they work cumulatively to help you construct a top-notch piece of scholarly prose.

The semester-long process of composing the junior essay begins when you submit a **two-page prospectus** outlining your critical agenda. While your tutor will discuss your plans with you, it is your job to develop a workable and coherent idea for your essay. The prospectus should articulate a **thesis**: a one-sentence argument that unifies your claims. If someone asks you what you are writing about, you should be able to provide a clear and concise answer. This argument may (and probably will) change as you conduct more research and begin drafting your essay, but you should know as soon as possible what you *expect* your argument to be.

An **annotated bibliography** of approximately 10 sources will accompany the prospectus. The annotations for each source should include a summary of the main argument or takeaway (including direct quotations of key terms, phrases, and sentences) as well as an explanation of how you intend to use the work in your junior essay. In addition, it may be helpful to note the **techniques and methods** (e.g. close reading, archival research, &c.) that a given piece of scholarship employs to achieve its ends. You should think of the bibliography as a sort of living database that will expand and change as you pursue additional research and refine your claims.

Together, the prospectus and bibliography constitute a foundation for your project. They allow you to begin developing an argument that participates in a **critical conversation** with other scholars. As you elaborate your thesis, you should think of this conversation, a portion of which is represented in your bibliography, as an ongoing and lively exchange that you are about to enter. From the moment you begin drafting your prospectus, then, it is crucial to reflect on how your observations and claims engage those of other thinkers. In some cases, you may clearly agree or disagree with another scholar, but it is important to realize that secondary sources (journal articles, scholarly books, reviews, &c.) are not merely tools that can be applied to the analysis of literature. Rather, such sources provide a network of concepts through which to imagine an argument.

After your prospectus is approved, it is time to begin **refining your argument** and **drafting your essay**. Refining an argument involves three interrelated steps. First, you should **test the thesis** in your prospectus against the evidence of your primary sources by reading carefully and closely. Don't be afraid of evidence that works against your thesis or doesn't quite fit; instead, try to think of such evidence as an invitation to re-describe your argument in more sophisticated terms. Second, you should begin to **track patterns within the critical conversation** that are relevant to your work. How do other scholars discuss your topic? Do they address it directly or indirectly? Are scholars talking to each other? Do certain scholars or works get cited regularly? Take note of these patterns in your annotated bibliography. Third, you should **think about how your thesis alters, interrupts, or adds something new** to the scholarly literature. Ask yourself why we need your essay in the critical archive.

Keep this question in mind as you produce the first draft, which will be due one month prior to the final due date. Before you meet to **discuss your draft** with your tutor and your peers, you should **assess its strengths and weaknesses** so that you can invite others to give you pointed feedback. Producing a good essay requires solitude, yes, but the best critical writing also emerges from a social context. Take seriously the confusions, suggestions, and challenges of your tutor and your peers as you head toward the final stages of revising. Finally, because critical style is inseparable from analytical substance, try to **reserve a few days for editing your prose**, potentially in consultation with the Departmental Writing Fellow, to construct the most elegant verbal formulations that you can.