

SPECULATIVE ARGUMENT

LIT 101, SPRING 2014, COX

THE CONTEXT: In our work so far, we've looked at the Fantastical Renaissance purely as a function of entertainment, as a range of stories our culture has become fond of telling and hearing in recent years. But there's more to speculation than tales of wonder. In many ways, much academic work is also speculative: a scholar in a particular field poses a question or new idea and does research and analysis to figure out where this thought experiment will take her. Using this process, we arrive at conclusions and concepts otherwise undiscovered. For the final essay, you'll use analysis, a little research, and a healthy dose of original thinking to speculate about a topic of your choosing.

THE PROJECT: Your aim in this essay is to pose a speculative "what if?" question, then use research and critical thinking to propose an answer, ultimately showing readers why your speculation matters.

THE PROCESS: You'll start with a topic from a field of your choice (history, sociology, or science, for example) and speculate about it. That speculation can take one of two main forms. First, a pondering of how the subject might be different in an alternate world (e.g. What if the South had won the Civil War? What if Earth had two moons?) Or, second, an extrapolation of what might happen if certain conditions change or persist (e.g. What will happen if we devise a way to clone a human being? What will the developing world look like in fifty years if AIDS continues to ravage it?)

Once you have a topic, you'll delve into your speculation by following a series of three big questions: **What if? Then what? So what?** So, the essay will investigate the major idea under speculative consideration ("What if?"), your answers to that question and the ramifications of those answers ("Then what?"), and, finally, why this speculation is worth making ("So what?"). You'll use critical thinking, logic, and some judicious research to answer these questions.

The result of all this speculation, research, and analysis will be a **4 to 6 page speculative argument essay** that presents your findings for an audience, discussing the speculation as you've uncovered it, and showing the reader what it all means. Your ultimate goal is to use your research and analysis to propose an answer to your speculation (The "what if" and "then what" ideas), and to suggest what speculating about this topic tells us that's important for us to know (the "so what" idea). While structure can vary, the first two questions will likely get preliminary answers in your thesis, then the essay itself will further develop those ideas and lead us to the "so what?" Your essay should do more than simply imagine a changed or future world; it should provide logic and evidence to support that imagined premise, and let us know why imagining it at all is worth doing, what insights it provides us about the world as it really exists.

The research you do for this essay will likely not be as extensive as what you did for the research article, but you want evidence to support the specific claims and implications you make. That said, I'm not specifying a number of sources or required categories; you need enough to support your speculation satisfactorily, whatever that might mean in your case. Make this decision wisely.

THE AUDIENCE: Your audience for this assignment are intelligent, educated people who are basically familiar with the topic as it exists in reality. That means they look to your essay for its speculation, to show them a new, inventive way to understand this topic. That means your audience will grow bored with too much background or simple repetition of what we already know. Make us rethink this topic. This essay allows for more variation of tone, authorial presence and voice, as well as non-traditional approaches; your choices, as ever, depend on topic and project.

GRADING: Essay 3 is worth 200 points, and I will grade it based on the CWP grading criteria in the syllabus and the specific requirements listed on this sheet. While the essay should be a strong piece of writing overall, as suggested by the CWP criteria, I will primarily be looking for application of the skills we've worked on in class:

- thoroughness of thought about the speculation, its implications, and its significance;
- an insightful thesis that unifies and propels the essay;
- strong reasoning and effective logic to support the thesis and other claims;
- thoughtful basis in a point of departure and careful avoidance of the “black and white trap”;
- effective use of apt evidence to support the claims, showing integration and active use;
- an opener that establishes the project and engages the reader;
- an organization, suited to the project, including strong structure and movement;
- paragraphs that are internally both cohesive and coherent;
- transitional strategies to link ideas and paragraphs in a line of thought;
- a closer that finishes the argument and addresses the “so what?” question;
- careful consideration of all stylistic choices: word choices, sentence variety, tone, etc.;
- genuine revision: evidence of real development from the exercises and the workshop draft.

(And, naturally, I'll also be looking for technical perfection: absence of grammar, spelling, and mechanical errors, and correctness of format and citation.)

A reminder: Meeting the minimum requirements of the assignment will earn you a C grade; to achieve higher grades, you need to go beyond “getting the job done” by challenging your skills, deepening your thinking, and taking intellectual and creative risks.

DUE DATES AND DETAILS

Pre-Draft: Tuesday, April 22

Workshop Draft: Friday, April 25

Draft Workshop Memos: Emailed to peers and me no later than 7 p.m. on Tuesday, April 29

Final Draft Due: No later than 5 p.m. in my office on Tuesday, May 6

Format:

- ◆ Computer generated
- ◆ 4-6 pages (based on *correct* formatting)
- ◆ MLA formatting (see Lunsford pp. 246-53)
- ◆ MLA-style citations and works cited page
- ◆ Stapled

Portfolio Requirements:

- ◆ Final draft
- ◆ Workshop draft
- ◆ Workshop materials
- ◆ Essay-related in-class exercises
- ◆ Other drafts/prewriting materials (optional)

NOTE: These are the three process assignments I used to scaffold the paper, each focusing on a different stage of the process and skill set the paper needed. They received feedback on each from me and from classmates.

EXERCISE 3A

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Your first task in the Speculative Argument sequence will be to audition topic possibilities for your project. The goal here is to explore options before making a rash decision. So, you will think of **three equally viable topic possibilities** and explore them a bit. For each topic, type the following:

- In one sentence, pose your speculative question.
- In a sentence or two, explain why this question attracts you, intellectually, and what you hope to explore with it. What issues or ideas might this speculation uncover or lead to?
- In a few sentences, explain what kinds of research you might need to do to begin developing the speculation.

I'm evaluating you based on your following of the directions and your showing me you've thought seriously about all three of these possibilities. **Due: Tuesday, April 8**

EXERCISE 3B

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In this exercise, you're going to consider the point of departure for your speculation. That is, you'll think about what you already know (or think you know) about your topic, as well as what basis your speculation will have. Drawing upon all your current ideas and information, type answers to the following two questions:

1. What is the basic situation regarding this topic as it really is? In other words, establish the ground rules you'll be working from.
 - If you're speculating an alternative: What actually happened in reality?
 - If you're speculating into the future: Where do things stand in the present?
2. What is the point of departure for your speculation? That is, define for yourself (and, by extension, for your essay) the basis of how your speculation works.
 - If you're speculating an alternative: What is the mechanism by which the alternative happens? That is, how will you justify the change you're perpetrating on the real world? When, how, and why does it deviate from the normal world? Why are you choosing to do it this way?
 - If you're speculating into the future: What is the important factor that either changes or persists? Why and how will it change or persist? Why are you choosing to do it this way?

Take 1-2 pages to develop answers to these questions. Every speculation needs to be based in some viable questions, and it needs to have a sense of parameters and logic. Taking time to do think about this well now will give you a firmer starting point for the essay itself and stronger justification for your ideas. **Due: Friday, April 11**

EXERCISE 3C

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By now, you've done some research and thinking about your speculation. In this exercise, you'll try to move some of that work toward a preliminary argument. Drawing upon your ideas so far, complete the following steps. Feel free to retype the work you did in class, but since you have more time to think about it than you did in class, you will find it advantageous to refine the ideas and take them further. Do as much as you need to in order to begin solidifying your thoughts. **Due: Tuesday, April 15**

Part I: Conclusions

Map out some of your logical conclusions in the way I showed you with the projections and handouts. Start with what you know about reality and your research (“**We know that...**”), then add a question or deviation (“**So, if...**”), and follow it through to a conclusion (“**Then...**”). Try this process with a few of the central ideas about your speculation. And maybe follow some of your conclusions through to subsequent steps by tracing “**Since...**,” “**If...**,” and “**Then...**”. (See the examples handout from what we looked at in class to remind yourself of what I mean.)

Part II: Working Argument

Look at the ideas you just generated and try to work them into a few sentences that express the core of this argument. (Again, consult the handouts for examples of this.)

Part III: Assumptions

Look at the argument you just cooked up and see how many assumptions are embedded in it that your essay will need to address, support, or account for. Remember such assumptions as those of value, cause and effect, and terminology, as well as any others you see.