

SHORTER ANALYTICAL PAPER

This paper asks you to conduct a small piece of original research using our primary sources. You will choose ONE of the prompts on the other side of this sheet. You can write on any text we are reading before Fall Break (“The Foster Portfolio,” the selected Satires of Horace, the selected Satires of Juvenal, “Dinner with Trimalchio” from The Satyricon, “Lanval,” “Sir Orfeo,” and Mankind). With my permission, you may use a reading from later in the semester as your second text for Topic #2 or #3.

Length: At least 4–6 full pages of text, double spaced, following MLA format, plus an accurate Works Cited page. These topics require enough space to develop your investigation fully; in my experience, they cannot be adequately addressed in a substantially shorter paper. A template is available at success.obenauf.net. Papers that fall short of these basic requirements should not expect to receive credit and may not be resubmitted.

Due: Monday, October 5, 2026, in hard copy at the start of class.

Notes: You are not expected to know your answer when you begin. Start with a question that interests you and let your argument unfold as you follow the evidence. Ask what particular details signal, suggest, point to, or imply about your topic. When the evidence seems to conflict, don’t ignore the problem or assume you’ve taken a wrong turn—figuring out how seemingly contradictory evidence fits together may lead you to your most important discoveries. Your thesis will come later, when you know what your investigation has actually shown you. The purpose is not to guess the “right” answer or simply to produce a few pages for Dr. Obenauf’s reading enjoyment—it is to use primary evidence to discover something for yourself.

Write for a reader who has not taken this class. Give that reader enough context to understand your argument, and remember that the order in which you present your argument will differ from the order in which you discover it. Once your investigation has led you to a thesis, write an introduction that leads your reader to it. Make your evidence traceable and your reasoning visible: your reader should be able to find the passages you discuss and follow how the evidence led you to your conclusions. Quote accurately, cite the edition you actually used, and make sure your Works Cited page accurately identifies your sources. Your conclusion should go beyond merely recapping what you’ve already said.

Do this investigation yourself, using only our course materials. Do not consult outside research, summaries, criticism, citation generators, AI tools, or other resources for any part of the assignment; doing so at any stage would short-circuit the process this paper is designed to teach. Everything you need is in the assigned texts, the Guide to Writing, and the MLA resources provided for this course. See the syllabus for more information.

Topic #1: Investigate whom—or what—ONE text invites its audience to admire. Begin by identifying people, actions, qualities, choices, or ways of living that the text appears to present favorably, and those that it does not. Look closely at the evidence that led you to those judgments. As you investigate, consider whether “admiration” adequately describes what the text is asking of its audience. Use the patterns you discover to explain what the text’s judgments and apparent inconsistencies reveal about success in the society for which it was originally written.

Topic #2: Investigate ONE concept associated with success in TWO texts. Choose a concept such as power, status, money, friendship, ambition, love, reputation, education, knowledge, etc. and use it as a proxy for understanding success. Concepts associated with success have meant different things at different places and at different times in history, so use the evidence in each text to construct your own historically grounded definition of your chosen concept rather than beginning with a modern dictionary definition. Approach each stage of this investigation thesis-last: analyze the evidence in your first text before deciding what your concept means there; then begin again with your second text and allow its evidence to produce its own definition. Only after you have reached those conclusions should you compare and contrast them. What important similarities and differences emerge? Your comparison should lead you to the larger thesis of your paper—an argument about what your chosen concept reveals about how success was understood in the worlds for which your texts were written.

Topic #3: Investigate ONE pair of “meaningful differences” in TWO texts. Review the reflection questions we have considered throughout the semester and choose a pair of related concepts whose distinction interests you, such as:

- love vs. loyalty
- honor vs. duty
- loyalty vs. duty
- greed vs. ambition
- word vs. action
- moderation vs. abstinence
- human worth vs. possessions
- obedience vs. disobedience
- greed vs. envy
- life vs. death

You may use a question originally posed in connection with an unrelated text, or propose a pair of meaningful differences of your own with Dr. Obenauf’s prior written approval. Also, any pair of texts is fair game; they need not come from different historical periods or societies. The combinations are endless.

The structure of this option gives you a clear path through a thesis-last investigation in three stages; you might think of it as a series of experiments that eventually come together to produce the larger argument of your paper. First, investigate each concept in your first text and use the evidence to determine what distinction the text suggests between them—what does that distinction reveal about how success was understood in the world of the text? Then do it again with your second text, allowing its evidence to produce its own understanding of each concept and the distinction between them. Finally, compare and contrast your findings, returning to both texts for additional evidence as necessary. What similarities and differences emerge, and what do they suggest about the way each society appears to have understood success? This final comparison should lead you to the larger thesis of your paper.