

General suggestions for writing Humanities essays:

The two essays for Humanities 4 give you the opportunity to read the texts closely with a particular question in mind. The process, which should be familiar to most of you by now, involves developing a thesis, gathering evidence from the texts, and crafting an argument. A typical paper will consist of an introduction that raises the question you will discuss and includes a thesis statement. Subsequent paragraphs introduce evidence from the text to prove your point; it can also be useful to anticipate and refute potential objections to your argument. Your conclusion should drive home your main idea, but it should not just be a restatement of your opening paragraph.

Keep your argument focused. Don't begin with sweeping generalities ("Since the dawn of time, man has pondered the meaning of the universe ..."). Quote judiciously from the text, but keep the quotations short and integrate them into your prose so that they form part of a grammatical sentence. Check for the obvious: is spelling correct? Does the subject agree with the verb? Avoid repetition of words and phrases. Also avoid slang (Gulliver was, like, totally bummed at the end of the novel) and obfuscation (impressive-sounding jargon that makes little sense). Clear, succinct, elegant prose is the goal.

Good writing takes time. Start early, read closely, and don't turn in the first draft that you pounded out in the wee hours before the due date. Reading well involves rereading and writing well means rewriting. Learn how to edit your own prose so that the style is clear and the argument convincing. It's a useful skill to develop, no matter what your major or eventual career might be.

You are not encouraged to consult secondary literature, but if you do use ideas that you find in articles online, books from the library, or even the introduction to your editions, you must footnote them appropriately. Using someone else's ideas or words without proper attribution is a serious violation of the student honor code. If you are caught, you can be placed on academic probation. If you are caught again, you can even be expelled from the university. It's not worth the risk.

On a positive note, writing, while experienced by many as a painful process with even more painful results, can also be a deeply absorbing experience that brings a sense of great satisfaction. Take your time, enjoy the experience, and be proud of what you produce.