The first 5-6-page essay is due at the beginning of lecture on Friday, January 30th (but please do stay for class after you turn in your paper!). Below you will find three possible topics, followed by the general suggestions to keep in mind while writing your essay.

1. “From today’s perspective it is easy to accuse eighteenth-century Europeans of being arrogant or worse in their treatment of foreign people and cultures. The works we have read this quarter thus far challenge this thesis, however: Robinson Crusoe loves Friday and does his best to understand him; Gulliver shows deep respect for the cultures he encounters, as does Candide.”

Do you agree or disagree? Pick two of the three works and write a thesis-driven essay based on a close reading of the two texts. You do not have to argue that both works are the same: they might be the same or they might be different, depending on your point of view. The main thing is that you have a clear thesis and make your case based on evidence from the text. (Please note: if you choose to write on Robinson Crusoe, you should be sure to read pages 122-184, which depict Crusoe’s relationship with Friday).

2. In his short essay written in response to the question “What is Enlightenment?” Immanuel Kant poses a rhetorical question: are we living in an age of enlightenment yet? No. Are we making progress in that direction? Yes.

How do Robinson Crusoe, Gulliver, and/or Candide feel about the efficacy of human reason and do their views change in the course of their experiences? Pick two of the three works and write a thesis-driven essay based on a close reading of the two texts. You do not have to argue that both works are the same: they might be or they might be different, depending on your point of view. The main thing is that you have a clear thesis and make your case based on evidence from the text.

3. The British philosopher Hobbes famously claimed that without a strong government, life would be nasty, brutish, and short. By our standards, life was already quite nasty in 17th- and 18th-century Europe: people were often brutish to one another, and lives tended to be short. Write a thesis-driven essay about the role of violence, cruelty, physical pain, or mental suffering in two of the three works: Robinson Crusoe, Gulliver’s Travels, and
Candide. Who suffers or inflicts pain on others, and how does it relate to the larger context of the two works?

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 that prove your point; it can also be useful to anticipate and refute potential objections to your argument. Your conclusion should drive home your main point, 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 colloquialisms (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.