Length: 1500-2000 words (not including your works cited list).

As stated on the syllabus, the purpose of a survey course is to give you a broad view of the literary terrain of a given period. Here in the paper you will delve somewhat more deeply into one of themes, forms, or trends we have discussed this term by joining an ongoing professional critical conversation or debate concerning it.

TOPIC

The topic or subject of your paper you might determine, but only very generally. That subject may be a theme (e.g. women and power in 18th century novels) a form (e.g. the epistolary novel in the late 18th century) or a trend (e.g. changing notions of “nature” in American poetry from the 18th into the 19th century). The FOCUS of your paper, however, will be determined by the research you do.

RESEARCH

Once you decide on a subject to write about, you must enter the critical conversation by reading about what others have said about it. Go to the library and find critical work on your subject, using your subject and the writers concerned (and their specific works, perhaps) in your search terms in the library catalogs and databases. The MLA International database is a fine source for this sort of search, but there are many similar and related databases under “Humanities” that will help you just as well. Once you find some articles (or even books?) that comment directly on your topic, your job will be to find two or at most three that present related but differing opinions on your subject (do not merely present any old two or three opinions; your goal is to present a critical conversation, which implies that individual voices aren’t talking alone, but “to each other”). While critics may refer to other critics by name in their work (most often in footnotes), your job is to present their arguments in such a way that your reader can clearly see several different positions or arguments on the same subject (ideally the same literary work).

FORM OF THE PAPER

Like any good paper, this one will not present your ideas in the order you discovered them. Doing so will tip the reader off that he is reading a “uni-draft,” an unrevised “dumping” of research on paper. This kind of paper will not receive a passing grade.

The first section of your paper should present the local context of the issue under discussion. If you are writing on the epistolary novel of the late 18th century, for example, you would tell us what one is, who wrote them, and why. Take no more than 2 pages for this section. Obviously, there are some subjects that cannot be handled in such a space!! That means, do not choose them for your paper in the first place. Of course, any subject you choose might lead to a 30-page presentation before mentioning any criticism. The key here is to CHOOSE what to include in this introduction: what will your reader have to know to understand what follows? This is a writing challenge.
In the second section, you will introduce and paraphrase (using quotation where necessary but only as necessary) the critical commentaries you have chosen to focus upon. Your goal in this section is not only to fairly present the arguments of other critics but to clearly present to your reader what is at stake in their different presentations of the subject and work under discussion. This should be the longest section of your paper.

In a briefer third section, take a side, or present a third (or different) possibility. Argue why one critic’s argument should carry the day, or why a different position is possible. Make sure to cite all sources properly (using MLA style) and include a list of Works Cited.

GRADING

You will be graded on your organization (following this section of the instructions), the clarity of your presentation of the critical conversation, and the effectiveness of the argument you put forth assessing the subject and opinions in question. Success in all of this depends on the clarity, correctness and accuracy of your writing. If you understand what you read (and thus feel you deserve a good grade), you must do justice to that understanding by choosing the precise words you need to convey what you have discovered.