

ESSAY GUIDELINES

TOPIC

One of the themes that has consistently surfaced in our discussions this semester has been how Athenians (and other ancient Greeks) understood the idea of “right” or moral action, that is what moral or ethical system that authorizes, constrains, or promotes a given course of action. In light of the rapid social and intellectual changes in Athens in the fifth century, it is not surprising that this question would permeate the works of Athenian tragedians, comic playwrights, historians, philosophers, logographoi, and poets.

For this essay, you are to compare the underlying conception of “right action” found in Thucydides’ seminal descriptions of the Mytilenean Debate and the Melian Dialogue with the conception of “right action” found in one other work we have read this semester.

In preparing your essay, you should first analyze the moral or ethic assumptions at play in Thucydides’ account in either or both the Mytilenean Debate (3.27–50) and the Melian Dialogue (5.84–113). When writing your essay, you may choose to focus on one or both of these passages. You should then select a work in which a similar or different conception of “right action” is presented and compare the conception with that articulated in Thucydides.

Your discussion must be based on the careful analysis of specific passages in Thucydides and the other work you chose. This topic is one that demands a thoughtful and nuanced discussion; broad, unsubstantiated generalizations will not result in an effective, persuasive argument. Finally, a successful essay will contextualize your findings within a discussion of the wider intellectual and moral changes of the fifth century.

I am happy to discuss possible topics with you via email, after class, or during my office hours.

DUE: Monday, December 3rd at 5 P.M.

DETAILS

Length: 5-6 pages, double-spaced

Font: Times 12 pt.

Margins: Top and bottom margins: 1”; side margins: 1.25” (“MS Word default”)

Footnotes (not endnotes)

Attach a completed **Checklist for Papers**

Note: an 5-to-6-page paper must include 5-to-6-pages of your writing; citation footnotes, images, title page, and bibliography do not count towards this figure. Conversely, do not pile information that is critical to your argument into footnotes in an attempt to squeeze your paper down below the page limit.

SUGGESTIONS

1) When discussing literary texts, knowing extent to which a particular character or position is representative of the opinion of the author presents a notorious difficulty. Unless you are confident that a viewpoint can reasonably be ascribed to the writer (e.g. Thucydides' summary of Pericles' position and strategy in Book 2), it is best to avoid this interpretative quagmire. Rather be forthright and consistent about which characters are presenting which viewpoints, and avoid granting these opinions the weight of authorial authority.

2) *Morals* and *ethics* are not the same. Be certain that you understand the difference and are using the appropriate terminology in your discussion. The *New Oxford American Dictionary* summarizes the distinction thusly:

"You can be an ethical person without necessarily being a moral one, since ethical implies conformity with a code of fair and honest behavior..., while moral refers to generally accepted standards of goodness and rightness in character and conduct."

In many of the works that we have read this semester, the nature of "right action" is itself contested by different characters within a given work. Think of our discussion of *Antigone* or *Medea*—certainly Jason's or Creon's understanding of what qualifies as moral action will differ significantly from Medea's. Likewise Thucydides' Melians and Athenians appeal to quite different moral calculus in justifying their actions and seeking to persuade their adversaries. Therefore, when composing your essay, you should be careful to articulate whether the conception of "right action" you are delineating is that found in the work as a whole, or a particular character in that work. Both approaches are valid, but whichever position you are taking must be clearly articulated in your essay.

Remember that all academic writing is, inherently, persuasive. In essence, this means that you are supporting a coherent and engaging thesis using specific, persuasive evidence from your sources. Writing persuasively, however, must never be confused with writing deceptively. Think of your audience (in this case your professor) as an interested, but skeptical, reader. If you omit or distort evidence contrary to your argument, your skeptical audience will recognize the move and your authority (and that of your argument) will be compromised. Rather, be honest about your argument and the limitations of your evidence, and your argument will be more persuasive for it.

A guide to citing sources in a Classics paper is available at:
<http://www.haverford.edu/classics/courses/omni/citations.html>