

STERN COLLEGE FOR WOMEN  
YESHIVA UNIVERSITY

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Office Hours: TBA

EMILY DICKINSON: A QUIET – EARTHQUAKE STYLE:

**An Introductory Writing Seminar**

Tuesday – Thursday 3:15 – 4:30

Room 406

**COURSE DESCRIPTION**

Who was Emily Dickinson? Known in her lifetime only for her eccentricities and her baking, Emily Dickinson has long been recognized as one of the greatest American poets – and, as t-shirts and mugs attest, a pop culture icon. For nearly a century, critics and biographers have argued about the meaning of Dickinson’s strange, sometimes maddeningly obscure poems, her place in English and American literature, how her handwritten manuscripts (none of her poems were published with her consent) should be edited for publication. And then of course there is the question of Dickinson’s life: Why did she become a recluse? Did she want to publish her poems? Why did she write so differently from her predecessors and contemporaries? What was the source of the agonies she describes so often in her poems?

This class will explore the mysteries of Emily Dickinson – and the larger questions her work raises about poetry, gender and American literature and culture - through three distinct units. We will begin by learning how to read, enjoy and analyze her brief, strange poems. Then we will compare Dickinson’s themes, forms and use of language to those of some of her contemporaries – Ralph Waldo Emerson, Walt Whitman, and once-popular women poets such as Helen Hunt Jackson (a good friend of Dickinson’s), and Rose Terry Cooke. Finally, we will examine what critics have made of Dickinson, comparing early studies with very different accounts by Adrienne Rich, Crisianne Miller and other recent critics, with particular interest in “the woman question” – the continuing critical fascination with Dickinson’s gender - to try to understand the mysterious relation between life and art that underlies the “quiet – Earthquake style” of this extraordinary poet.

**REQUIRED TEXTS:**

*EasyWriter: A Pocket Guide*, by Andrea Lunsford and Robert Connors. St. Martin's Press.

*Writing with Sources: A Guide for Students*, by Gordon Harvey. Hackett Publishing.

*The Craft of Research*, by Wayne Booth, Gregory Colomb and Joseph M. Williams. U. of Chicago Press.

*The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson*, edited by Thomas H. Johnson. Little, Brown.

*Emily Dickinson: A Collection of Critical Essays*, edited by Judith Farr. Prentice Hall.

**DUE DATES:**

[NOTE: These might change - if they do, you'll have plenty of warning]

Tu Sept 2: Pre-Draft 1.1  
Tu Sept 9: Pre-Draft 1.2  
Mon Sept 15: Draft of Essay #1  
Th Sep 18: Draft Response to draft writers  
Mon Sept 22: Revision of Essay #1  
Th Sept 25: Pre-Draft 2.1  
Tu Sep 30: Pre-Draft 2.2  
Wed Oct 15: Draft of Essay #2  
Th Oct 23: Draft Response to draft writers  
Tu Oct 28: Post-Draft 2.3  
Mon Nov 3: Revision of Essay #2  
Mon Nov 10: Pre-Draft 3.1  
Mon Nov 17: Pre-Draft 3.2  
Mon Nov 24: Pre-Draft 3.3  
Mon Dec 1: Draft of Essay #3  
Mon Dec 15: Revision of Essay #3

## COURSE STRUCTURE

This is a writing seminar – a seminar designed to teach you ways of developing, organizing and presenting your ideas in writing. Our focus will be Emily Dickinson, but the techniques you will learn will apply to every subject that demands clear, logical and cogent exposition. Throughout, we will approach writing as an ongoing process of thinking and learning that begins the moment you start to ask questions about a subject, continues through note-taking and other exploratory jottings, and develops into a presentable product through cycles of drafting, feedback and revision.

The course will be organized around three writing assignments (described below). Each assignment will introduce you to a common writing task (close reading, comparative analysis, contextualizing an argument, and controlled research); each builds on skills practiced in previous assignments, and introduces new techniques and challenges. Every assignment will help you master the structure that is the backbone of expository writing: stating a **thesis** (your main idea or argument); explaining your thesis through a logical series of **claims** (individual points that must be explained or demonstrated to support your thesis); and presenting **evidence** (examples and analysis) which support those your claims.

Each assignment will be preceded by “pre-draft” assignments, brief, ungraded exercises designed to develop the skills demanded by the assignment. (I usually won’t comment much if at all on pre-drafts, though I will be happy to discuss them with you.) You will hand in two versions of each essay: an ungraded draft, which you and I will discuss in a private conference; and a graded, substantially rewritten revision. Since writers must learn to recognize the strengths and weaknesses of their work, you will introduce each draft and revision with a cover letter in which you describe what your essay is about, where you think it succeeds and where it needs more work.

## OVERVIEW OF WRITING ASSIGNMENT SEQUENCES

### Essay #1: “Because I could not stop for Death” / A Close-Reading Essay (4-5 pages)

**Essay Assignment:** “Because I could not stop for Death” is one the most accessible of Dickinson’s major poems. However, despite its apparent clarity, it has provoked a wide range of contradictory interpretations. Using close reading to support your claims, present your interpretation of what this poem does or doesn’t say about death, life and what comes after them.

**Focal Skill: Close Reading.** Close reading means analyzing small passages of text to highlight issues or problems; explain or develop concepts; or support claims. We will practice close reading both as a means of generating ideas and questions, and as a way of using text (in this case, a poem) as evidence to support a thesis.

**Pre-draft Assignments:** (1.1) Formulate genuine questions about the portrayal of death in this poem; (1.2) Mark up - annotate – your own copy of this poem.

### Essay #2: Doubt and Certainty / A Compare-and-Contrast Essay (6 to 7 pages)

**Essay Assignment:** Doubt, Dickinson claimed, is one of humanity’s greatest possessions. Many of her contemporaries shared Dickinson’s interest in the limits of human knowledge. Compare and contrast the portrayal of certainty and doubt in Dickinson’s “This Consciousness that is Aware” (701) with their portrayal in **either** Helen Hunt Jackson’s “Doubt,” a selected passage of Emerson’s

“Self-Reliance,” a section of Whitman’s “Song of Myself,” or Rose Terry Cooke’s “Truths.”

**Focal Skill: Compare and Contrast.** In this assignment, you will learn how complex ideas can be developed and presented by comparing and contrasting how two different texts treat the same subject. We will begin by learning how compare-and-contrast works, how to establish and explain a valid comparison, and how comparison can help us understand texts and generate ideas for a thesis. Then we will learn how to apply compare-and-contrast analysis in presenting evidence to support claims, and how compare-and-contrast techniques can help structure arguments.

**Pre-draft Assignments:** (2.1) List similarities and differences in the representation of certainty and doubt in “This Consciousness that is Aware” and Emerson’s “Self-Reliance”; (2.2) Write two comparative theses regarding “This Consciousness that is Aware”’s representation of certainty and doubt and that in “Self-Reliance” (or, if you prefer, in one of the poems listed above) – one which emphasizes an underlying similarity and one which emphasizes an essential difference.

**Post-draft Assignment:** (2.3) Describe your plan for revising your essay

### **Essay #3: “Talking Back to Emily Dickinson”: Contextualizing an Argument (8 to 9 pages)**

**Essay Assignment:** Present your own thesis on ONE question regarding Emily Dickinson's work or life as a response - or challenge - to existing critical claims. Support your thesis with a survey and analysis of claims made by Dickinson critics or biographers, as well as close readings of one or two texts by Dickinson (poems and/or letters) that highlight the issues you wish to explore.

**Focal Skill: Contextualizing.** “Contextualizing” means developing and presenting ideas in relation to others’ positions. First, we will learn to analyze and summarize others’ claims; then, we will learn to use others’ arguments as evidence to support or develop our own claims.

**Pre-draft Assignments:** (3.1) Summarize the critical claims regarding Dickinson's merits as a poet expressed in the assigned critical selections. (3.2) Formulate a research question, and write a one-page discussion that shows how a single Dickinson poem relates to the question you will focus on in your essay. (3.3) Write a paper proposal with critical bibliography.

## **COURSE POLICIES:**

1. **Completion of work.** Students must complete three essays to receive a passing grade. While students who have missed an essay may still have a passing average in the Seminar, the four-essay policy assures that students must complete the entire course to receive credit.

1a. **Submission of work.** In most cases, I give two deadlines for submission of work: an email deadline and a hard copy deadline. Emailed work **MUST** be a) attached in Word document form; **AND** b) pasted into the body of the email.

2. **Extensions and late work.** We will be squeezing a lot of writing into a very short semester. To keep up with this pace - and to get the most out of the structure of the program - it is important that you meet the assigned deadlines for drafts and final essays. Requests for extensions will be considered on a case-by-case basis, and may require documentation of your need for an extension. Final essays which are turned in late (i.e., after the deadline and without an extension) will be penalized 1/3 of a grade per calendar day. **NOTE: Work turned in late without an extension – or with an extension for other than medical or other urgent reasons – will not receive written feedback.**

3. **Plagiarism.** Plagiarism – the unacknowledged use of someone else’s ideas or words – is a serious academic offense. (For example, I need to acknowledge that this syllabus relies heavily on materials developed by the Harvard and Princeton expository writing programs.) Documented instances of plagiarism will be pursued through the appropriate disciplinary channels.

4. **Attendance.** Unexcused absences are not acceptable and will affect your final grade. More importantly, because this seminar crams a lot of work into a fairly short amount of time, missing classes will seriously reduce your benefit from the course. Grounds for excused absence are documented cases of illness or family emergency, observance of religious holidays, and other pressing personal circumstances. **NOTE:** Except in documented cases of emergency, absences will **ONLY** be excused if I am notified in advance.

5. **Class participation.** Writing is a largely solitary activity. Our class will only give you invaluable written and verbal feedback but will also help you develop and complicate your ideas, steer you in useful new directions, and teach you how to benefit from and contribute to a writing group. To make these benefits possible, I expect every student to actively, thoughtfully, participate in every class: to listen actively and empathetically, to ask questions and raise issues, and to contribute comments that show you have carefully read the material. You will also be expected to regularly share your writing with the group, and to provide constructive, respectful feedback on others' writing.

6. **Missed conferences.** Conferences will be scheduled in advance, via sign-up sheets. It is your responsibility to sign up for conferences at times you can make, and to show up at those times. If you fail to sign up or miss a conference, that conference will not be rescheduled, except in cases of documented illness or family emergency.

7. **Assessing final grades.** Your three final essays will constitute 85% of the final course grade. (Drafts and pre-drafts will **NOT** be graded.) Pre-drafts and incidental writing will constitute 5% of your grade, and class participation 10%. If you show marked improvement in your writing over the course, I

will award you an extra half grade. Grades are not negotiable.

**8. Criteria for grading of final essays.** The grades on your final essays are a means of letting you know how I judge your writing. They won't be infallibly objective, but they will be as objective and consistent as I can make them. Grades will reflect my assessment of the writing you submit, not your effort, time spent, degree of improvement, etc. They aren't judgments of you as a person, as a student, or even as a writer; they are judgments of the piece of writing they appear on. The point of grading is communication: I will be happy to discuss my grades with you, and to hear any comments - including objections - you may have. However, **GRADES ARE NOT NEGOTIABLE**. Final grades stand. If you are unhappy with a grade you receive, let's work together to see that your next essay is better.

Grading is a crucial aspect of our communication about your writing, so it is essential that you know what I mean by the grades I assign. I am a tough grader; my goal is to get you to be a better writer, no matter how good you already are, and no matter how hard you are trying. My grading will focus on how well your essays utilize and deploy the Thesis / Claims / Evidence structure we will be studying in class – not how graceful your style is, or even how good your insights are. If your essay doesn't have a thesis, I will not give you a higher grade than C+. If your essay has a thesis, I will give you at least a B-. If that thesis is deficient in some way, isn't articulated well, doesn't remain the focus of your essay, isn't developed through a logical series of claims, or isn't supported by evidence and analysis, I will not give you a higher grade than B. If your essay's thesis is fully formed, well articulated, remains the focus of your essay, is developed through a logical series of claims and is supported well by evidence and analysis, I will give you at least an A-.

Beyond basic structure, the following will give you an idea of the criteria I use in grading your final essays; they're adapted from grading rubrics by Maxine Rodburg and Kerry Walk. Pluses and minus represent shades of difference.

**A range:** Excellent in every way (this is not the same as perfect). This is an ambitious, perceptive essay that has an arguable, incisive thesis, and a logical, progressive (not just a list) structure with strong and obvious links between points and well-organized paragraphs. Its beginning opens up, rather than flatly announces, its thesis; its end is something more than a summary. This essay grapples with interesting, complex ideas; anticipates and responds to counter-arguments; and explores well-chosen evidence revealingly. The sources are selected well, quoted and cited correctly, and deployed in a range of ways (to motivate the argument, provide key terms, and so on). The discussion enhances, rather than reiterates, the reader's and writer's knowledge; it involves exploration, discovery; it doesn't simply repeat what has been taught. There is a context for all the ideas; someone outside the class would be enriched, not confused, by reading the essay. The language is clean, clear, precise, conversational yet sophisticated; the diction is appropriate to the audience. There's something new here for me, something only the essay's writer could have written and explored, in this particular way. The writer's stake in the material is obvious.

**B range:** A piece of writing that reaches high and achieves many of its aims. The thesis is arguable but may be vague, implied rather than stated early on or not argued consistently throughout; it may feature unintegrated parts. The structure is generally logical but either confusing in places (big jumps, missing links) or overly predictable and undeveloped; there may be too few complications, too little consideration of counter-arguments, some disorganized paragraphs. The ideas are solid and progressively explored but some thin patches require more analysis and/or some stray thoughts don't fit in. The evidence is relevant, but there may be too little; the context for the evidence may not be sufficiently explored, so that I have to make some of the connections the writer should have made clear

for me; some may be presented as undigested quotation. The sources are quoted and cited correctly, but deployed in limited ways. The language is generally clear and precise but occasionally not, and may be weighed down by fancy but pointless diction.

OR A piece of writing that reaches less high than an A essay but thoroughly achieves its aims. This is a solid essay that avoid the problems listed above, but whose reasoning and argument are rather routine, uninteresting, predictable.

**C range:** A piece of writing that has major problems in at least one of these areas: **THESIS** (vague, descriptive or confusing; parts aren't integrated; implied rather than stated; not argued throughout); **STRUCTURE** (confusing - big jumps, missing links - or overly predictable, "5-paragraph theme"; little complication or consideration of counter-argument; disorganized, skimpy paragraphs, often headed with description rather than argumentative topic sentences); **EVIDENCE** (weak - undigested quotation - or non-existent; connections between claims and evidence are not made or are presented without context, or amount to platitudes or generalizations); **ANALYSIS** (some insights but generally either missing in action or mere summary; may present some misreadings); **SOURCES** (plopped in, if used at all; may be quoted or cited incorrectly, used merely as filler or as affirmation or writer's viewpoint); **STYLE** (sentences often awkward, dependent on unexplained abstractions, sometimes contradict each other; the language may be generally unclear and hard to read, or simplistic; may contain many technical errors).

OR An essay that is largely plot summary or "interpretive summary" of the text - i.e., lacks an arguable thesis - but is written without major problems.

OR An essay that is chiefly a personal reaction to something. Well-written, but scant on intellectual content - mostly opinion.

**D range and below...** An essay that is extremely problematic in many of the areas mentioned above. The thesis is missing or purely description (an observation or statement of fact), or may be a total misreading. The structure is confusing, featuring little focused development (rambles rather than argues); disorganized paragraphs; and missing, garbled or purely descriptive topic sentences (plot summary). Claims are not supported by relevant or sufficient evidence; quotations are not analyzed or are taken out of context; sources are plopped in, quoted and cited in correctly, and do little more than take up space. Analysis is either non-existent or based on misinterpretation or mere summary. The language is either simplistic or difficult to reader, and probably riddled with technical errors.

OR An essay that is wildly shorter than it ought to be to grapple seriously with ideas.

OR an essay that does not come close to addressing the expectations of the assignment.

**PLEASE EMAIL ME WHEN YOU HAVE READ THE FOREGOING INFORMATION.**

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Office Hours: TBA; and by appointment

## **EMILY DICKINSON: A QUIET – EARTHQUAKE STYLE** **English 1100 Class Schedule**

Note: An asterisk (\*) indicates that I've included a fuller explanation in "Assignments." UNLESS OTHERWISE NOTED, ASSIGNMENTS MUST BE TURNED IN BOTH BY EMAIL (PASTED IN AND ATTACHED) AND IN HARD COPY.

### **WEEK 1: Begin Essay #1\*: “Because I could not stop for Death” / A Close-Reading Essay**

**Focal Topics:** Introduction to “literature-based writing seminar”; Thesis/Claims/Evidence structure; reading Emily Dickinson. Writing as Process. Asking genuine questions

Aug 28:

**Writing (in class):** Good questions exercise

**Reading:** Dickinson, “I’m Nobody” (288) (in class)

Aug 29 (no class – just reading):

**Reading:** Course Information, Essay #1 Syllabus, and Essay #1 Assignments

My tips on reading Emily Dickinson (handout)

Dickinson, “Because I could not stop for Death” (712) and find at least three other poems which interest you in some way (keep a list throughout the semester of what you’ve read – note which poems interest you and which don’t)

### **WEEK 2:**

**Focal Topics:** What’s a thesis?; what’s a claim?; Close-reading to generate questions and ideas; Close-reading to support a claim (see Tate essay); Dickinson’s use of imagery, tone and punctuation

Sept 2:

**Writing DUE:** Predraft 1.1\* is due by second class (NOTE: you don’t need to turn this in)

**Writing (in class):** Mark up parts of model student essay

**Reading:** Gordon Harvey’s “Elements of the Academic Essay” (handout)

Model student essay (handout)

Dickinson, “Afraid? Of whom am I afraid?” (608), “All but Death, can be adjusted” (749), “Their Height in Heaven comforts not” (696), and find at least three more Dickinson poems which interest you in some way (and update your list!)

Sep 4:

**Writing (in class):** Identify Tate's claims and evidence

**Reading:** ON RESERVE: Allen Tate, "Emily Dickinson," in Sewall's *Emily Dickinson: A Collection of Critical Essays* (compare Tate's version of "Because I could not stop" to the one in your anthology)  
Dickinson, find at least three more Dickinson poems which interest you in some way (add them – and those which didn't interest you - to your list!)

### WEEK 3: Conference Sign-Up and Set Up Writing Partners

**Focal Topics:** Framing claims and presenting evidence; What do you do with evidence? (effective analysis); Drafts and the writing process; How Dickinson's grammar affects her meaning; Dickinson and death

Sep 9:

**Writing DUE:** Predraft 1.2\* is due (hard copy) by 9 am TUESDAY (NOTE: give me a copy and keep one yourself)

**Reading:** ON RESERVE: Archibald MacLeish, "The Private World," in Sewall's *Emily Dickinson*

Dickinson poems in MacLeish essay and find at least two more Dickinson poems which interest you in some way

Sep 11:

**Writing (in class):** How does Dickinson's peculiar language affect our ability to understand and explicate her?

**Reading:** *Craft of Research*: Chapter 8, "Claims and Evidence," Sections 8-8.2

IN FARR: Cristanne Miller, "Dickinson's Experimental Grammar"

Dickinson, "I heard a Fly buzz – when I died" (465), "My life closed twice before it closed" (1732), "The Only News I know" (827) and "Of nearness to her sundered Things" (607)

### WEEK 4: Conferences and Draft Workshops

**FIRST DRAFT OF ESSAY #1\* (email) DUE BY 9 am MONDAY, SEPTEMBER 15  
(hard copy due Tuesday 8 am)**

**Focal Topics:** Drafting – exploration vs. shaping; Responding to others' writing – and using others's responses; Revision as re-vision (where do you go from here?); Crafting a functional thesis

Sep 16:

**Writing (in class):** Find the Thesis – etc.: Parts of an Essay exercise

**Reading:** Draft essays (circulated via email by Monday evening; please print out, mark up and bring in)

*Craft of Research* Chapter 11, "Pre-Drafting and Drafting," Sections 11.2-11.4;

Quick Tip: Using Quotation and Paraphrase (pp. 172-74)

Dickinson, find at least two more Dickinson poems that interest you in some

way (add them – and those which didn't interest you - to your list!)

Sep 18:

**Writing Assignment DUE before class: Draft Responses\* to writing partners (please e-mail me a copy)**

**Writing (in class):** Find Your Own “Loser Sentence” exercise

**Reading:** Draft essays (circulated via email by Tuesday evening; please print out, mark up and bring in);

*Craft of Research*: "Quick Tip: Titles and Abstracts" (pp. 212-14); Chapter 14, "Revising Style"; "Quick Tip: The Quickest Revision" (pp. 232-33)

Dickinson, find at least two more Dickinson poems that interest you

## **Week 5: Begin Essay #2: Doubt and Certainty / A Compare-and-Contrast Essay**

**FINAL DRAFT OF ESSAY #1\* with Revision Cover Letter\* DUE BY 9 am by email MONDAY, SEPTEMBER 22 (hard copy- with pre-drafts, drafts, and Revision Cover Letter\* paper-clipped to it - due Tuesday 8 am)**

**Focal Topics:** What is compare-and-contrast analysis? (Discuss Essay #2 writing assignment\*); Assessing similarity and difference (pre-draft 2.1\*); How to compare poems; How were contemporary poets like or unlike Dickinson?; Emerson and “Self-Reliance”

Sep 23:

**Writing DUE:** Please bring copies of your list of Dickinson favorites and duds to share in class – or email them to everyone before class

**Writing (in class):** Listing similarities and differences between Dickinson's and contemporaries' poetry

**Reading:** Walk, "How to Write a Comparative Analysis" (handout)

Helen Hunt Jackson's “Doubt”; Whitman's “Song of Myself” (excerpt); Rose Terry Cooke's “Truths” (handouts)

Dickinson, “This Consciousness that is Aware” (822)

Sep 25:

**Writing DUE:** Predraft 2.1\* is due by 9 am (hard copy) on Thursday (NOTE: give me a copy and keep one yourself)

**Reading:** ON RESERVE: Emerson's “Self-Reliance”

## **WEEK 6 (L'shana tovah!): Conference Sign-Up and Set Up Writing Partners**

**Focal Topics:** Generating a compare-and-contrast thesis (Pre-Draft 2.2\*); How to structure a compare-and-contrast analysis; Bringing issues into focus through comparison; What are “doubt” and “certainty,” and how do we (and Dickinson) tell the difference?; Dickinson and the act of definition

Sep 30:

**Writing DUE:** Predraft 2.2\* is due at 9 am on Tuesday (NOTE: give me a copy and keep one yourself)

**Reading:** ON RESERVE: Sharon Cameron, “Naming as History: Dickinson's Poems of

Definition” in Paul Ferlazzo’s *Critical Essays on Emily Dickinson*  
Dickinson, “It was not Death” (510), “Truth – is as old as God” (836), “The Truth  
is stirless” (780), “It was not Saint – it was too large” (1092), “The Loneliness  
One dare not sound” (777), poems cited in Cameron

Oct 2:

**Writing (none):**

**Reading:** Dickinson, “It’s easy to invent a life” (724), “I like a look of Agony” (241),  
“I am afraid to own a Body” (1090), “I dwell in Possibility” (657), “Four Trees –  
upon a solitary Acre” (742)

## YOM KIPPUR – SUKKOT BREAK

**FIRST DRAFT OF ESSAY #2\* (email) DUE BY 12 noon on WEDNESDAY,  
OCTOBER 15 (No hard copy necessary)**

## WEEK 7: Conferences and Draft Workshops

**Focal Topics:** How comparison structures theses and arguments; Integrating sources into  
arguments; Writing effective, catchy introductions;

Oct 21:

**Writing (in class):** Rewrite someone else’s intro

**Reading:** Draft essays (circulated via email by Monday evening; please print out, mark up  
and bring in)

*Craft of Research*, “Quick Tip: A Taxonomy of Contradictions” (107-10);  
Chapter 15: “Introductions”  
Anthology of introductions (handout)

Oct 23:

**Writing Assignment DUE before class: Draft Responses\* to writing partners (please e-  
mail me a copy)**

**Reading:** Draft essays (circulated via email by Tuesday evening; please print out, mark up  
and bring in)

*Writing With Sources* pp. 3-12 (“Integrating Sources Into a Paper”), 14-21  
 (“Citing Sources”) and 35-42 (“Styles of Documentation”)

## WEEK 8:

**Focal Topics:** Re-vision; Crafting a thesis; Using compare-and-contrast for thematic analysis  
(and how Richard Wilbur does it); Dickinson and phenomenology;

Oct 28:

**Writing Assignment DUE:** Post-Draft 2.3\* is due at 9 am on Tuesday (NOTE: give me a  
copy and keep one yourself)

**Reading:** IN FARR: Richard Wilbur, “Sumptuous Destitution”  
Dickinson, poems cited by Wilbur

Oct 30:

**Writing (in class):** Let's make a compare-and-contrast thesis (small-group exercise)

**Reading:** Dickinson, "One need not be a Chamber – to be Haunted" (670), "There's a certain Slant of Light" (258), Dickinson, "I am alive – I guess" (470), "I cautious, scanned my little life" (178), "The difference between Despair" (305), "A thought went up my mind today" (701), "Pain – has an Element of Blank" (650)

**WEEK 9: BEGIN ESSAY #3: "Talking Back to Emily Dickinson" / Contextualizing an Argument**

**FINAL DRAFT OF ESSAY #2\* with Revision Cover Letter\* (including list of thesis claim and subsequent claims\*) DUE BY 9 am by email MONDAY, NOVEMBER 3 (hard copy- with pre-drafts, drafts, and Revision Cover Letter\* paper-clipped to it – due Wednesday 9 am)**

**Focal Topics:** What is "contextualizing"? Discuss Essay #3\*; What ARE Dickinson's poems, and how can they be evaluated?

Nov 4: NO CLASS (Election Day)

Nov 6:

**Writing Assignment: None**

**Reading:** ON RESERVE: William Pritchard, "Talking Back to Emily Dickinson," in Pritchard's book by the same name  
Dickinson, poems referred to in Pritchard essay

**WEEK 10:**

**Focal Topics:** Developing research questions; How do critics back up claims – and fight?; Summarizing and comparing critical claims; Critiquing critical arguments; How DO we interpret Dickinson's linguistic peculiarities?

Nov 10:

**Writing DUE:** Predraft 3.1\* is due by 9 am (email) on Monday

Nov 11:

**Reading:** IN FARR: Introduction (pages 1-19) and pages 53-4 (Wilbur), 76 (Burbick), 119-20 (Wolf)  
Dickinson, poems referred to in the critical writings, and "I heard a Fly buzz" (465), "This was a Poet" (448), and "To pile like Thunder" (1247)

Nov 13:

**Writing Assignment (in class):** Small group exercise: who is more convincing, Blackmur or Reeves – and why

**Reading:** *Craft of Research*, Chapters 3-4: "From Topics to Questions," "From Questions to Problems," and "From Questions to Sources"

ON RESERVE: R.P. Blackmur, "Emily Dickinson: Notes on Prejudice and Fact"; James Reeves, "Introduction to *Selected Poems of Emily Dickinson*," in Sewell's

**WEEK 11:**

**Focal Topics:** From questions to problems; How critical problems shape poetic analysis (predraft. 3.2); xtreme claims and evidence – how critics stake out turf and fight

Nov 17:

**Writing DUE:** Predraft 3.2\* is due by 9 am (email) on Monday; bring a copy to your library session tomorrow and to THURSDAY'S class

Nov 18: Library session

**Writing Assignment:** None

**Reading:** *Craft of Research*, Chapters 5: "From Questions to Sources"

Nov 20:

**In class:** Workshop research questions (predraft 3.2)

**Reading:** ON RESERVE: Martha Nell Smith, "Dickinson's Manuscripts," pp. 113-8, 122-7, in *The Emily Dickinson Handbook*

IN FARR: Jerome McGann, "Emily Dickinson's Visible Language"; pages 188-94 (Denman)

Dickinson, poems referred to in essays and "Publication is the Auction" (709)

**WEEK 12: Conference Sign-Up and Set Up Writing Groups (for Group Conferences)**

**Focal Topics:** The great manuscript debate; editing Dickinson; counter-argument, Domnhall-style

Nov 24:

**Writing DUE:** Predraft 3.3\* is due by 9 am (email) on Monday; bring a copy to class

Nov 25:

**Writing Assignment (in class):** Small group exercise: Edit a poem and defend your edit

**Reading:** ON RESERVE: Domhnall Mitchell, *Dickinson: Monarch of Perception*, "Revising the Script: Dickinson's Manuscripts" (pp. 199-205, 225-7)

Dickinson, poems referred to in the critical writing

HANDOUT: Sample Dickinson manuscript and variant versions

Nov 27: **NO CLASS – THANKSGIVING BREAK**

**WEEK 13: Group Conferences and Draft Workshops**

About Group Conferences: We will be having group conferences this time around. You will need to read the drafts of the other members of your Writing Group before your conference and be prepared to discuss them. While you need not write out your Draft Responses\*, you should make copious notes to speak from.

Dec 1:

**FIRST DRAFT OF ESSAY #3\* (email) DUE BY 9 am MONDAY  
(hard copy due Tuesday 8 am)**

**Focal Topics:** The Do's and Don'ts of Contextualizing; Posing a Critical Problem; Conclusions; "Stitching" ideas together; What don't we know about our theses, and when don't we know it?; What turns a thesis into a robust thesis?

Dec 2:

**Writing Assignment (in class):** Matching the Problem and the Solution

**Reading:** Draft essays (circulated via email by Monday evening; please print out, mark up and bring in)

HANDOUT: My list of thesis elements

Dec 4:

**Reading:** Draft essays (circulated via email by Tuesday evening; please print out, mark up and bring in)

#### **WEEK 14:**

**Focal Topics:** How DOES Dickinson's life relate to her art? Using counter-argument to develop your own ideas; Finding counter-evidence; What's the fuss about gender?

Dec 9:

**Writing Assignment (in class):** What questions are raised by Rich's portrayal of Dickinson and gender? What would effective counter-evidence look like?

**Reading:** ON RESERVE: Adrienne Rich, "Vesuvius at Home"; Richard Sewell, *The Life of Emily Dickinson*, "The Problem of the Biographer" (pp. 3-11)

Dickinson, poems in Rich essay

Dec 11:

**Reading:** RESERVE: Jane Eberwein, "Doing Without: Dickinson as Yankee Woman Poet," in Sewall's collection of critical essays

Dickinson, poems referred to in the essay and "Essential Oils - are wrung" (675), "He fumbles at your Soul" (315), "The Soul has Bandaged moments" (512)

#### **WEEK 15:**

**Focal Topics:** Evaluation; self-assessment; wrap-up

Dec 15:

**FINAL DRAFT OF ESSAY #3\* with Revision Cover Letter\* (including list of thesis claim and subsequent claims\*) DUE BY 9 am by email MONDAY, DECEMBER 15 (hard copy- with pre-drafts, drafts, and Revision Cover Letter\* paper-clipped to it – due Tuesday 8 am)**

Dec 16: LAST CLASS!

**Writing Assignment:** Course evaluations

**Reading:** None

## ESSAY SEQUENCE #1: CLOSE READING A TEXT

### “Because I could not stop for Death”: A Close-Reading Essay

“Close reading” is the basis for most literary analysis and critical study, and is also widely used in other text-based disciplines. Arguments which are grounded in texts generally use – or at least should use – close reading in their presentation of evidence. Though the term sounds like it refers to a specific procedure, close reading actually refers to any analytical procedure that works **up** from the details of language use in a text – e.g., the way a given image is presented, the word choice in a particular sentence, how a certain sentence structure shapes the rhythm and impact of a piece of rhetoric, etc. – rather than working **down** from a general idea. In other words, close reading means discovering your ideas as you think about the peculiarities and characteristics of a given text, rather than using a text to support or illustrate general ideas. Close reading is exploratory, unpredictable, and exciting – for both writers and readers. To “do” close readings in an essay is to teach your readers how to read the text the way you read it, so that they can experience the insights you have experienced. By teaching your readers how to read a text your way, you enable them to examine and deepen their own ways of reading.

**Assignment:** “Because I could not stop for Death” is one the most accessible of Dickinson’s major poems. However, despite its apparent clarity, it has provoked a wide range of contradictory interpretations. Using close reading to support your claims, present your interpretation of what this poem does or doesn’t say about death, life and what comes after them. DON’T try to explain the whole poem, or to give an account of each line. Rather, focus your thesis and essay on one question or idea about the poem – for example, who the speaker is, or why she describes death as a coachman, or how the changes in punctuation made by the poem’s first editors change its meaning - and use close reading to explain to the reader what you think and why you think it.

Your essay should: 1) present a thesis about how to read or understand some aspect of “Because I could not stop for Death”; 2) develop that thesis through a series of logical claims which gradually explain and demonstrate your main claim about the poem; and 3) support those claims with close reading analyses of relevant passages from the poem.

The final essay will probably be 4-5 pages long.

### Advice

Your essay should have a beginning, a middle, and an end, and develop (as opposed to restate) a central idea, also known as a thesis.

### Goals of the Essay

Writing this essay will help you learn to ...

**Provide a close reading with a thesis and a motive.** A close reading is *not* a line-by-line analysis of a passage but rather a coherent argument based on such a painstaking examination.

**Structure the essay according to your argument**, avoiding plot summary, on the one hand, and the five-paragraph essay, on the other. When arguing for your interpretation of a poem, you should

structure your essay according to your *thesis* about the speech, not necessarily according to the flow of the poem itself. Note that your thesis should be both unified and worth arguing; it should *not*, in other words, have three prongs (e.g., imagery, diction, and tone), each one of which gets explored in a single paragraph.

**Orient your reader.** You should address your essay to readers who have read the poem you are discussing, but not recently and not in-depth. You will need to *orient* them with appropriate reminders (quick summaries of scenes, explanations of the context of quotations), always making sure those explanations serve a purpose in your essay as a whole (not just summary for its own sake). Your readers should always know where you are in the text, through the material you provide to jog their memories. Never assume (1) that readers know what to look for, (2) that they'll read a passage in the same way that you do, and (3) that they'll draw the same conclusions. Your *analysis* of the *evidence* should persuade your readers of the validity of your claims.

**Use active verbs** and limit your use of "to be" verbs. "To be" verbs include *is, are, was, were, be, to be, been, and being*. This simple style issue will invigorate your prose, and has its best effect if you remain aware of it as you draft and write, rather than translating sentences out of "to be" mode once the draft is done. You will also avoid empty phrases such as "there is" and "there are" to introduce your ideas (example: "There are two important metaphors in this poem.") Work instead for stronger constructions and phrasing that actually tell your reader what's important in that sentence (e.g., "The two dominant metaphors in this poem imply/demonstrate/describe/complicate ...").

**Document sources using the MLA in-text citation method.** This citation method requires that you cite your sources in the text of your essay (as opposed to using footnotes or endnotes) and that you append a correctly formatted list of Works Cited to your essay.

### **Pre-Draft Writing Assignments, or Pre-Drafts** (to be typed, in most cases)

Each time you write an essay in this writing seminar, you'll begin with plenty of material from the pre-draft writing assignments ("pre-drafts") you've done to get you thinking and writing. Each pre-draft represents a way to break down the final essay assignment into a significant step: reflecting on the readings, brainstorming ideas, preparing to write, reshaping ideas. You'll certainly find that the thinking you do in these pre-draft informs the way you approach your essay; you'll also find in some cases that you've produced sentences, or even whole paragraphs, that make their way to your final essay. That is one of the intentions of the pre-drafts; when those happy occurrences strike, make the most of them (you can't plagiarize yourself!). You are also likely to see your ideas evolve from the pre-draft stage to the final draft, sometimes resulting in substantial changes in focus or argument. In these instances, the pre-drafts have helped you work through less successful ideas on the way to discovering more challenging and interesting essays.

#### **Pre-Draft 1.1:**

Read "Because I could not stop for Death" several times, and, in about 1 single-spaced page:

- 1) List everything about the poem (from punctuation to metaphysics) that strikes you as peculiar, hard to understand, thought-provoking or otherwise raises questions in your mind.

- 2) Ask at least five genuine questions (i.e., questions that you are actually interested in) about this poem. To give you an idea of what a genuine question might be, consider a few of mine: What does it mean to compare death to an endless carriage ride? Is the speaker on her way to some other state of being, or is she going to be riding forever? Is “kindly” sarcastic or a literal description?

### **Pre-Draft 1.2: Annotating and Analyzing a Poem**

Follow these steps (you'll be handing in your responses to each step) with regard to “Because I could not stop for Death”:

- 1) Why this one? Describe in a paragraph why this poem interests, annoys, attracts, baffles, enrages or otherwise engage you.
- 2) Mark it up. Get to know the poem by reading it aloud, perhaps even memorizing it. Then type it out yourself and annotate it: underline key words, note significant details (prominent sound patterns, key linebreaks, words or phrases that jump out at you), mark favorite lines, draw arrows between related lines and images and so on. As you annotate, get a sense of the meaning and movement of the poem. What is it about? Where does it start from and where does it move to? What happens in it? Who's speaking it? What point of view or points of view is it written from? How many tones of voice do you hear in it, and what are they? What parts are confusing or ambiguous? Which seem to have more than one possible meaning? Where does it speed up or slow down? On another piece of paper, write down your impressions and observations.
- 3) Paraphrase. As a check on your comprehension, put the poem into your own words. For example, “I had put away / My labor and my leisure too” might become “the speaker describes dying as moving beyond human activity and categories of time.” You will probably be able to paraphrase some parts of the poem very concisely, while paraphrasing other parts will take more words than the original.

You should use your paraphrase to 1) summarize the overall thrust of the poem; and 2) puzzle through phrases, images, metaphors and so on that may be confusing or that may have more than one meaning.

- 4) Themes. Look at your annotations and notes and see what you've got. What themes emerge when you look closely at the passage? What coherent sense of the speaker, scene and situation come into view?

### **Draft**

The draft you hand in should not be rough, the first thing you tap into your computer. Rather, it should be your best possible effort at getting your ideas on paper and *shaping* those ideas into a coherent and readable whole. The better your draft, the more useful will be the feedback you get on it.

There's a story about a young newspaper reporter who wrote her first story and handed it in to the editor. “Is it as good as you can make it?” the editor asked. “No, it isn't,” the reporter answered, and so the editor handed it back. After a day of revising, the reporter handed in a new version. “Is it as good as you can make it?” the editor asked again. “Well, no, it isn't,” the reporter found himself replying again. Once again, the editor handed it back. More revising ensued. When, for the third time, the

reporter handed in the story and the editor asked, "Is it as good as you can make it?" the reporter replied, "Yes." "I'll read it, then," said the editor.

Your draft should be as good as you can make it.

### **Essay #1 Draft Cover Letter**

Each time you hand in a draft, you'll attach a cover letter to the front. For the draft of Essay #1, please write a letter, addressed to your readers, in which you answer the following questions and present any other concerns that you have. Think of the letter as an opportunity to ask for the kind of feedback you think you particularly need. All cover letters should be typed, and should be about a page long.

- 1) What do you see as your main idea or point?
- 2) What are the biggest problems you're having at this point in the writing process?
- 3) What idea or point do you feel you've made most successfully? least successfully?
- 4) What's the number one question about your essay - its thesis, structure, use of evidence, persuasiveness, style, and so on - that you'd like your reader(s) to answer for you?
- 5) If you were going to start revising today, what three things would you focus on? how would you begin?

### **Essay #1 Draft Response**

Each time you read other people's drafts in this course, you'll write a letter in response, which you should ordinarily give them in hardcopy form. Every time you write one of these letters, please also give me a copy, either in hard-copy form or via e-mail.

You should spend at least 30 minutes on each draft. Please be expansive and thoughtful in your comments. Try to make comments that you think will help the writer revise. Revision literally means "seeing again." Harvard's Nancy Sommers has found that when experienced writers revise, they often radically alter their idea and reorganize the entire essay. By contrast, when student writers revise, they change a few words here and there but leave the essay essentially unaltered. Help your partner become an experienced writer! She or he has several days to revise, so you can make comments that demand - and direct - a true revision. (That said, please be kind.)

#### Directions

As you carefully read and re-read each essay, *draw a squiggly line* under awkwardly expressed sentences and phrases whose meanings are unclear. *Write marginal notes* to the writer on anything that puzzles you.

After re-reading, write a letter to the writer in which you address these questions:

- 1) In your own words, what's this paper about? (What's its *idea*?) **Don't assume that the writer**

**knows what his or her own essay is about! Mistrust the stated thesis (if there is one).**

- 2) What do you see as the strength(s) of the draft?
- 3) Look at Gordon Harvey's "Elements of the Essay." Now identify two elements that you think the writer should focus on in revising and discuss these in relation to the draft. Try to point to specific sentences and paragraphs whenever possible.
- 4) In the cover letter, the writer has asked one or more questions. What answers do you have to offer?

### **Essay #1 Revision Cover Letter**

This is the cover letter, addressed to me, that you should staple to the front of your revision. Each time you hand in a revision, you should attach such a self-evaluation letter. This time around, please answer the following questions and address any other concerns you have:

- 1) What is your thesis? How has it changed from first draft to revision?
- 2) What are you happiest with in this revision?
- 3) Describe your drafting and revision process. What was most challenging? How did you approach those challenges?
- 4) What would you continue to work on in further revision?
- 5) Choose two "Elements of the Essay" - one that you think works well, and one that feels less successful - and describe why.

## ESSAY SEQUENCE #2: COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

One of the most frequent essay assignments in academia is to compare and contrast two texts. Your assignment for Essay #2 is to write just such an essay. The final version will probably be 5 to 6 pages long.

**Assignment:** Doubt, Dickinson claimed, is one of humanity's greatest possessions. Many of her contemporaries shared Dickinson's interest in the limits of human knowledge. Compare and contrast the portrayal of certainty and doubt in Dickinson's "This Consciousness that is Aware" (701) with their portrayal in **either** Helen Hunt Jackson's "Doubt," a selected passage of Emerson's "Self-Reliance," a section of Whitman's "Song of Myself," or Rose Terry Cooke's "Truths." Your essay should not only highlight a significant similarity or difference between the texts; it should make a claim as to what that similarity or difference **means**, i.e., why it is significant. In other words, the thesis you present and develop in this essay should have both a descriptive part, which draws attention to the specific comparison you are making, AND an interpretive part, which tells your readers what we can learn from this comparison.

**ADVICE:** As you develop your essay, keep these questions in mind (i.e., you don't have to answer them directly in the essay, but what you write should be informed by them): What is the most significant point of similarity or contrast between the way the texts represent certainty and doubt? What makes it significant? Can you state a counter-argument to your claim about its significance? Which claims, assumptions or passages will you focus on from these texts? How will you structure your essay? Keep your reader in mind while you map out your essay. What does your reader need to know first? What does your reader need to know next? And so on.

### Goals of the Essay

With this essay, you will continue to work on the goals you had in Essay #1: develop and state a clear thesis and motive, support your argument with textual evidence and analysis, structure your essay in a logical, non-repetitive way, and orient your reader. This time around, we'll be refining these skills and adding a few others:

1. Produce a successful comparative analysis, one that does more than list similarities and differences. The key, of course, is thesis. The handout on "How to Write a Comparative Analysis" by Dr. Kerry Walk will be helpful.
2. Motivate your essay: Motive is a way of letting your reader see what's at stake in your essay, to see why, in the words of Gordon Harvey in "Elements of the Academic Essay," "someone might want to read a paper on this topic or need to hear your particular thesis argued." Motive is typically expressed in terms of a "problem, difficulty, over-simplification, misapprehension, dilemma, or violated expectation, to which your thesis is a correction, explanation, clarification, solution, or contribution" (Harvey).
3. Open with an engaging introduction (among other things, making motive clear) and draw out the implication(s) of your argument in your essay's conclusion.

4. Structure your argument well, making clear, logical connections and distinctions between the different texts and between different parts of your argument.

### **Pre-Draft 2.1: Summary, Similarity and Difference**

- a) Read carefully through Emerson's "Self-Reliance," clearly marking each statement that relates to the issues of doubt or certainty. You will notice that significant portions of the texts are not relevant to the question. You will also notice that some ideas recur over and over again.
- b) Write a (maximum) half-page, single-spaced summary of how Emerson's "Self-Reliance" represents certainty and doubt. What does the essay seem certain and doubtful of? What does it say that people in general can be certain or should be doubtful of? How does it value or disparage certainty and doubt? Your summary should carefully attribute the ideas the author and quote as little as possible. As you summarize, focus on the passages you've marked, and pull from them a sense of Emerson's overall ideas and specific claims on this subject.
- c) Make a list of statements comparing how Emerson represents certainty or doubt with their representation in Dickinson's poem, "This Consciousness that is Aware." Each statement should begin either, "Like Emerson, Dickinson ..." or "Unlike Emerson, Dickinson..."
- d) Before turning in the assignment, put your list of statements in order from those you find most interesting or important to those you find least interesting or important.

### **Pre-Draft 2.2: Crafting a "Compare-'n-Contrast" Thesis**

- a) Choose the text you will compare to Dickinson's poem. If you have chosen something other than "Self-Reliance," go through the steps in Pre-Draft 2.1 to firm up your sense of how the text you have chosen represents certainty and doubt. If you have chosen "Self-Reliance," go over your annotations and pre-draft summary and identify a few key passages that relate most directly to the similarities or differences you find most interesting.
- b) Next, do some thinking-on-paper (or computer) about the way each text represents certainty and doubt. (NOTE: You won't be turning this in, so don't worry about your writing, spelling or even whether or not you are sure about what you are saying – you are developing your ideas, not presenting them to others.) Why do these representations of doubt and certainty matter – to the text, to the author, to you, to the world? What are the consequences of accepting them as true? How does each text support or justify or otherwise make these representations seem persuasive? What rhetorical devices (logical argument, metaphors, tonal shifts, etc.) does each use to amplify or drive them home? What contradictions, unanswered questions or other problems do these representations raise?
- c) Choose one of the most interesting or important **similarities** you notice between the texts' representations of doubt and certainty. Summarize it in a single declarative sentence (e.g., "Both Dickinson and Emerson present certainty as..."). Now choose one of the most interesting or important **differences** you notice between the texts' representations of doubt and certainty, and summarize that in a single declarative sentence (e.g., "Unlike Dickinson, Emerson presents certainty as...").

- d) Following the guidelines in Kerry Walk's essay on comparative analysis, use the similarity and difference you have chosen to construct two "Whereas" statements, one which begins with the similarity and ends with the difference, and one which begins with the difference and ends with the similarity. The resulting statements will be the **descriptive** parts of two difference compare-and-contrast theses.
- e) Do some more thinking-on-paper, in which you consider the possible significance of each of the "Whereas" statements: what they suggest about Dickinson, about Emerson, about both, about Americans, about notions of certainty and doubt – what they suggest about anything you think they might shed light on. Again, don't worry about how you are writing or what you are writing – you are brainstorming, not making a logical argument, and you won't be turning this writing in.
- f) Using your notes, add a single sentence to each of your "Whereas" statements in which you present an interpretive claim – a claim about the meaning or significance of the comparison the "Whereas" statement makes. You will then have two comparative thesis statements.

### **Essay #2 Draft Cover Letter**

Please write a letter, addressed to your readers, in which you answer the following questions and present any other concerns that you have. This letter should be typed and should run about three-quarters to a full page long. Staple it to the front of your essay.

- 1) What do you see as your thesis, or main idea?
- 2) What do you see as your motive? (Remember: your motive is your intellectual reason for writing the essay, the reason the argument needs to be made and thus read. Its signal word is "but" or "however.")
- 3) What are the biggest problems you're having at this point in the writing process?
- 4) What's the number one question about your essay - its thesis, structure, evidence, analysis, style, and so on - that you'd like your reader(s) to answer for you? What specifically is your concern?
- 5) When you revise, what's the one "big" thing - something related to thesis, motive, or structure - that you intend to change? How will you change it?

### **Essay #2 Draft Response**

When responding to someone else's draft, please be expansive and thoughtful in your comments, and try to make comments that you think will help the writer revise.

#### Directions

As you carefully read and re-read each draft,

1. Draw a squiggly line under awkwardly expressed sentences and phrases whose meanings are unclear;

2. Write marginal notes to the writer on anything that puzzles you; and
3. Label the topic of each paragraph; if you can't determine the topic, put a question mark.

After re-reading, write a letter to the writer in which you address the following:

- 1) Thesis and Motive. What's the essay's thesis, or controlling idea? What's the motive (its "so what," or reason for needing to be written)? State each in your own words (really, try not to use the writer's language here). Be tough! If thesis and motive aren't clear, let the writer know!
- 2) Evaluate the introduction. Does it invite you into the essay with an effective opener? Are context, motive, and thesis clear and effective? What could the writer do to improve the intro?
- 3) Comparative Analysis. Does the writer do more than list similarities and differences? Does the structure work? Are the transitions and connections between paragraphs and sections sufficient? Does the evidence support the writer's argument? How can the essay be improved?
- 4) In the cover letter, the writer has asked one or more questions. What answers do you have to offer?

### **Essay #2 Revision Cover Letter**

Please write a one-page letter, addressed to me, in which you discuss your revision. Be sure to state your thesis and motive.

**Also**, please attach to the letter a list – excerpted from your essay - of your thesis claim and the claims you make in the essay in the order they appear. NOTE: All claims should appear at the beginnings of your paragraphs, and all paragraphs should begin with a claim. If your essay is well-structured, your claims when read in order should essentially recapitulate and elaborate the claim you make in your thesis.

## ESSAY SEQUENCE 3: CONTEXTUALIZING AN ARGUMENT

### Talking Back to Emily Dickinson: Contextualizing an Argument (7-9 pages)

Emily Dickinson has inspired a century of argument and speculation. Because little is known about her life, almost every claim about Dickinson is based on close readings of her poems and letters rather than facts. Critics have used Dickinson's poems and letters to mount arguments about every aspect of Dickinson's life and art: What was Dickinson's sexuality? Why was she so isolated? What were her views on God, religion, the role of women, art, existence? Why was she so ambivalent about publication? What was her mental condition? What did her strange punctuation, grammar and word choices mean to her, and what do they mean to us when we read her poems? How should her manuscripts should be edited for publication? What were her poetic influences and intentions? How good (or bad) a poet is she?

**Assignment:** Your assignment is to choose one question about Dickinson (from the list above, or one of your own devising) and mount an argument regarding that question. You will support and develop your thesis with close readings of Dickinson's poems and/or letters; other critics' contentions; critiques of critical positions with which you disagree; and biographical information (if relevant). The assignment is deliberately wide: part of your job is to carve out an area of interest to you, and to show your readers why this area is important when it comes to understanding Emily Dickinson.

Your essay should refine and define the question you are considering, present your own thesis regarding it, and develop your argument through: 1) Posing a critical problem that motivates your thesis by showing what is at stake in the question you are pursuing – i.e., what can be gained by pursuing it, or what harm there is in failing to do so; 2) a comparative analysis of at least two texts (poems or letters) by Dickinson; and 3) a survey and critique of critical positions relevant to the question you are pursuing (I expect you to integrate at least three different secondary sources into your argument). Your finished essay will probably be 8 or 9 pages long.

**Grounding Your Argument:** One of the reasons that Dickinson has generated so many contradictory opinions is that her body of work is so vast and so varied that one can find passages in it to support nearly any theory. To mount your argument, you will need to 1) pose a problem or question about Dickinson's work, thought and/or life; 2) frame a thesis which addresses this problem or question; 3) close-read one or two poems or letters in order to develop your argument, and provide evidence which supports your claims; and 4) discuss relevant criticism which helps define your problem or question, makes clear its intellectual importance, or supports, challenges, or otherwise develops your argument.

**Sources:** Your primary sources – Dickinson texts - will serve as a focal point, an anchor, for your essay. Your readings of the texts you select as your major examples will help you: 1) concretely illustrate your overarching argument regarding Dickinson and gender; and 2) define and demonstrate what is at stake in your argument.

While the assigned readings may well provide theoretical and other material relevant to your overarching argument, you will need to do additional research to find relevant secondary sources. I have put materials which may be useful on reserve, but you should make an appointment with a research librarian

to identify the best research strategies and resources for your project. You will not directly cite all, or perhaps even most, of these secondary sources, but you cannot explore a significant critical question without a broad familiarity with the range of perspectives and issues concerned.

### **Special Instruction:**

Use an epigraph: a short, well-chosen quotation that appears below your title and above the introductory paragraph which comes from Dickinson's poetry or letters. You don't need to offer explicit commentary about it in your essay (though you may), but your reader should be able to tell why it's relevant to your discussion.

### **Advice**

In your essay, you'll need to establish focus. To do so, you should ...

- 1) Narrow your examination to a single aspect of Dickinson's work, thought or life, rather than attempting to mount an argument regarding all of her poems, ideas or biography. It will be up to you to select the concept or focus that interests you and to establish (implicitly or explicitly) its relevance to reading or understanding Dickinson. If you get stuck, let's talk.
- 2) Engage in at least one or two substantial close-readings of passages in Dickinson's poems or letters. Anchoring your essay with one or more close-readings is a strategy you can use when writing any essay on a topic that covers a lot of ground; the close-readings help you substantiate your argument and deepen your analysis. You will, of course, analyze and refer to more than these passages, but it should be clear to your reader which passages are the cornerstones of your analysis and why they are the most appropriate passages to anchor your discussion.

### **Goals of the Essay**

The goals of this essay are for you to carve from the assignment a topic that interests you, to do a limited amount of research, to juggle different kinds of sources in an essay, and to increase your control over all of the Elements of the Academic Essay. Essay #3 builds on the work we've done so far with close reading and analysis, and extends that work by considering primary texts in light of other sources. You should also continue your efforts regarding effective introductions and conclusions, as well as matters of style (clarity, sentence variety, etc.). At the same time, Essay #3 presents several new challenges, particularly in focus, use of sources, and structure.

1. Bring a broad topic into focus, as discussed above.
2. Deploy sources effectively. You will read an array of poems and critical excerpts. We will be discussing the various ways in which you might use these sources - to motivate your essay, enrich it conceptually, underpin it socio-historically, challenge it analytically, and so on.
3. Structure a complex argument and form effective paragraphs. Your thesis should develop in a series of logical steps, showing the direction of your argument rather than simply listing examples or restating your thesis. The "Elements of the Academic Essay" describes structure as an order that is both logical and progressive. We will review various structural options for the essay in class. We will also focus on structure at the level of the paragraph.

### **Pre-Draft 3.1: Surveying the Critical Literature**

What's good about Emily Dickinson's poetry? Critics have been worrying over that question for years. Your job is to:

- 1) Write a 1-3 sentence summary of how Pritchard and the critical sources the critical sources assigned for November 11 answer that question, paraphrasing as much as possible and quoting as little as possible. (For example, if Source X writes that, "What's most important about Dickinson's work is not what it says, but how it sounds," you might summarize, "X finds Dickinson's music much more 'important' than her content.") Also, list any sources which do not address that question.
- 2) Review your completed summaries, and write one paragraph in which you describe the range of critical opinion you have just compiled. What qualities do several critics seem to point to? What are the major disagreements or contradictions among them? Do differences in opinion about Dickinson's qualities seem to be tied to differences in critical focus? Gender? Other factors? What conclusions, issues or questions are suggested by your findings?
- 3) Support each of the findings in your paragraph with evidence from your summaries. For example, if a critical survey claimed that "Earlier critics tend to value Dickinson's imagery more than most recent critics," it might present a statement like this as evidence: "For example, X, writing in 1920, praises Dickinson's descriptive powers, a quality that Y, writing 50 years later, overlooks when she champions Dickinson's obscurity." This step - a mini-critical survey - should not be longer than one single-spaced page.

NOTE:TURN IN YOUR RAW SUMMARIES FROM STEP 1, YOUR SUMMARY PARAGRAPH FROM STEP 2, AND YOUR FINAL CRITICAL SURVEY (STEP 3).

### **Pre-Draft 3.2: Posing a Research Question and Analyzing a Dickinson Poem**

Dickinson, as everyone knows, is a "difficult" poet - for critics as well as for readers. The more directly a discussion of a Dickinson poem relates to the questions a given essay is pursuing, the easier it is to understand both Dickinson and the essay.

To practice how to read a Dickinson poem in relation to a critical argument, your assignment is to:

- 1) Draft the question that you intend to pursue in your essay. You may change your mind later, and you almost certainly will refine the question – but you have to start somewhere and sometime. This is that time. Using the suggestions in *The Craft of Research*, try to pose a question that reflects your interest, relates to broad issues but is focused enough to pursue in a short essay.
- 2) Write a one-page, single-spaced discussion of a single Dickinson poem that shows how the poem raises, complicates, explains or otherwise relates to your question. The purpose of the discussion is to show your classmates how the poem relates to the Dickinson question that you plan to focus on in your third essay - how it exemplifies Dickinson's poetic practice, for example, or presents her ideas, or suggests relations or tensions between her art and her life, or demonstrates the problems involved in reading or editing her work. Your page should be as clear, specific, and helpful as possible; it should both explain the question that interests you, and provide a guide to reading the

poem in relation to that question.

### **Pre-Draft 3.3: Paper Proposal with Critical Bibliography**

Write a one to two page paper proposal in which you discuss the specific question or issue you'll be addressing in your essay. Identify the primary and secondary texts that will provide your focus – and provide a brief explanation of how each secondary text seems relevant to your proposal. TIP: Let the research librarian help you efficiently identify relevant texts. I will respond to this proposal via e-mail.

### **Essay #3 Draft Cover Letter**

Please write a letter, addressed to your readers, in which you answer the following questions and present any other concerns that you have. This letter should be typed and should be about three-quarters to a full page long. Attach it to the front of your essay.

- 1) What do you see as your main idea or point? What do you see as your motive?
- 2) What are the biggest problems you're having at this point in the writing process? What have you done most successfully?
- 3) Which paragraph (except for the introduction) do you think is most successful and why? Which is least successful and why?
- 4) What's the number one question about your essay - its thesis, structure, use of evidence, use of sources, style, etc. - that you'd like your readers to answer for you? What is your specific concern about that topic?

### **Essay #3 Draft Response**

You'll be writing Draft Responses to the writers whose drafts we'll be workshopping. As you read each draft, please (1) squiggle unclear sentences and (2) note in the margin the main topic of each paragraph. When you've finished, sketch out a brief outline of the essay. Then write a letter in which you comment on the following issues:

- 1) What works best about the draft?
- 2) Thesis and Motive. In your own words, what is the main idea (the thesis) of this essay? Does the thesis statement make that idea clear? Does the idea shape the essay as a whole? What is the essay's motive - its "so what," or reason for needing to be written?
- 3) Sources: Note where the writer has (or has not) used sources effectively. What significant ideas do they contribute to the essay's discussion? What role do they play in the draft? Are there other ideas from the sources that the writer should consider? What does the writer do to integrate those sources into his or her own prose, and what could still improve? Do you see any citation problems?

- 4) Structure: How does the main idea develop? What are the steps or supporting claims of the thesis, and do they progress to form an argument? Are there places where structure seems weak, or relies too much on example rather than idea? Does the argument present a sense of complication? Where is the stitching from one idea to the next most successful, and where is it most in need of work?
- 5) Evidence and Analysis: Has the writer presented successful close reading of the evidence? Is the analysis of that evidence convincing? Are there places where evidence or analysis is needed?
- 6) Paragraphing. Select two paragraphs: one you think is successful and one you think needs work. Why does the successful one work, and what's the trouble with the less successful one? How can the writer address this problem? (Keep in mind Focus, Flow, and Form.)
- 7) What specific responses do you have to the concerns raised by the writer in his or her Cover Letter?

### **Essay #3 Revision Cover Letter**

Please answer the following questions and address any other concerns you have:

- 1) What are the motive and the thesis of your essay? How have they changed since the earlier version of the essay?
- 2) What new ideas did you discover in revision?
- 3) What are you happiest with in this revision? What was most challenging? Which revision strategies did you use or try?

**Also**, please attach to the letter a list – excerpted from your essay - of your thesis claim and the claims you make in the essay in the order they appear. NOTE: All claims should appear at the beginnings of your paragraphs, and all paragraphs should begin with a claim. If your essay is well-structured, your claims when read in order should essentially recapitulate and elaborate the claim you make in your thesis.

# HANDOUTS

Dr. Kerry Walk  
How to Write a Compare-and-Contrast Paper

Throughout your career at Harvard, you'll be asked to write papers in which you compare and contrast two things: two texts, two theories, two historical figures or events, two scientific processes, two cases studies, and so on. "Classic" compare-and-contrast papers, in which you weight A and B equally, may be about two similar things that have crucial differences (two pesticides with different effects on the environment) or two similar things that have crucial differences, yet turn out to have surprising commonalities after all (two judges with vastly different world views who voice unexpectedly similar perspectives on sexual harassment). In the "lens" (or "keyhole") comparison, in which you weight A less heavily than B, you use A as a lens through which to view B. Just as looking through a pair of glasses changes the way you see an object, using A as a framework for understanding B changes the way you see B. For example, by regarding Kate Chopin's novella *The Awakening* (B) through the lens of *The Home* (A), a contemporaneous feminist tract by Charlotte Perkins Gilman, one student found that critics' claims for Chopin's feminism were greatly exaggerated. Lens comparisons are useful for illuminating, critiquing, or challenging the stability of a thing that, before the analysis, seemed perfectly understood. Often, lens comparisons take time into account: earlier texts, events, or historical figures may illuminate later ones, and vice versa.

Faced with a daunting list of seemingly unrelated similarities and differences, you may feel confused about how to construct a paper that isn't just a mechanical exercise in which you first state all the features that Thing A and Thing B have in common, and then state all the ways in which Thing A and Thing B are different. Predictably, the thesis of such a paper is usually an assertion that A and B are very, very similar yet not so similar after all. To write a good compare-and-contrast, you must take your raw data - the similarities and differences you've observed - and make them cohere into a meaningful argument. Here are the five elements required.

**Frame of Reference:** This is the context within which you place the two things you plan to compare and contrast; it is the umbrella under which you have grouped them. The frame of reference may consist of an idea, theme, question, problem, or theory; a group of similar things from which you choose to extract two for special attention; or biographical or historical information. The best frames of reference are constructed from specific sources rather than your own thoughts or observations. Thus, in a paper comparing how two writers redefine social norms of masculinity, you would be better off quoting a sociologist on the topic of masculinity than spinning out potentially banal-sounding theories of your own. Most assignments tell you exactly what the frame of reference should be, and most courses supply an abundance of sources for constructing it. If you encounter an assignment that fails to provide a frame of reference, you must come up with one on your own. A paper without such a context would have no angle on the material, no focus or frame for the writer to propose a meaningful argument.

**Grounds for Comparison:** Let's say you're writing a paper on global food distribution, and you've chosen to compare apples and oranges. Why these particular fruits? Why not pears and bananas? The rationale behind your choice, the grounds for comparison, lets your reader know why you made the choice you did - why your choice is deliberate and meaningful, not random. For instance, in a paper asking how the "discourse of domesticity" has been used in the abortion debate, the grounds for comparison are obvious; the issue has two conflicting sides - pro-choice and pro-life. In a paper comparing the effects of acid rain on two forest sites, your choice of sites is less obvious. A paper focusing on similarly aged forest stands in Maine and the Catskills will be set up somewhat differently from a paper comparing a new forest stand in the White Mountains with an old one in the same region.

You need to indicate the reasoning behind your choice.

**Thesis:** The grounds for comparison anticipates the comparative nature of your thesis. As in any argumentative paper, your thesis statement will convey the gist of your argument, which necessarily follows from your frame of reference. But in a compare-and-contrast paper, the thesis depends on how the two things you've chosen to compare actually relate to one another. Do they extend, corroborate, complicate, contradict, correct, or debate one another? In other words, what kind of conversation are they engaged in? In the most common compare-and-contrast -one focusing on differences - you can indicate the relationship between the two things by using the word "whereas" in your thesis:

Whereas Camus perceives ideology as secondary to the need to address a specific historical moment of colonialism, Fanon perceives a revolutionary ideology as the impetus to reshape Algeria's history in a direction toward independence.

Whether your paper focuses primarily on difference or similarity, you need to make the relationship between A and B clear in your thesis. This relationship is at the heart of any compare-and-contrast paper.

**Organizational Scheme:** Your introduction includes your frame of reference, grounds for comparison, and thesis. There are two basic ways to organize the body of your paper. In text-by-text, you discuss all of A, then all of B. In point-by-point, you alternate points about A with comparable points about B. The organizational scheme you choose partly depends on how you perceive A and B to be related. If you think that B extends A, you'll probably use a text-by-text scheme; if you see A and B engaged in debate, you may want to use a point-by-point scheme to draw attention to the conflict. Be aware, however, that the point-by-point scheme can come off as a ping-pong game. You can avoid this effect by grouping more than one point together, thereby cutting down on the number of times you alternate from A to B.

You can organize a classic compare-and-contrast paper either text-by-text or point-by-point. But in a "lens" comparison, in which you spend significantly less time on A (the lens) than on B (the focal text), you almost always organize text-by-text. That's because A and B are not strictly comparable: A is merely a tool for helping you discover whether or not B's nature is actually what expectations have led you to believe it is. No matter which organizational scheme you choose, you need not give equal time to similarities and differences. In fact, your paper will be more interesting if you get to the heart of your argument as quickly as possible. Thus, a paper on two evolutionary theorists' very different interpretations of specific archaeological findings might have as few as two or three sentences in the introduction on similarities and at most a paragraph or two at the beginning of the paper to set up the contrast between the theorists' positions. The rest of the paper, whether organized text-by-text or point-by-point, will treat the two theorists' differences.

**Linking A and B:** All argumentative papers require you to link each point in the argument back to the thesis. Without such links, your reader will be unable to see how new sections logically and systematically advance your argument. In a compare-and-contrast paper, you also need to make links between A and B in the body of your essay if you want your paper to hold together. To make these links, use transitional expressions of comparison and contrast (similarly, moreover, likewise, on the contrary, on the other hand, whereas, by contrast, and conversely) and contrastive vocabulary (in the example below, the Old South/Northern):

"As a girl raised in the fading glory of the Old South, amid mystical tales of magnolias and moonlight,

the mother remains part of a dying generation. Surrounded by hard times, racial conflict, and limited opportunities, Julian, on the other hand, feels repelled by the provincial nature of home, and represents a new Southerner, one who sees his native land through a condescending Northerner's eyes."

#### Example: A Classic Compare-and-Contrast Paper Focusing on Differences

In response to an assignment asking for a comparison of two or three gothic tales, freshman Chad Hill wrote a paper about modern readers' disbelief in ghosts and how three modern gothic storytellers negotiate this disbelief in rather different ways. In the opening paragraph, Chad uses an essay by Terry Castle to construct a frame of reference about why we no longer believe in ghosts and the implications of our skepticism. In a second introductory paragraph, Chad introduces the three stories, observing as his grounds for comparison that these recent gothic tales each reflect their authors' modern skepticism. He ends this paragraph with a statement of his thesis, in which he relates the three texts - contrasting two (with "whereas") and using the third to resolve the conflict. In the body of the essay, Chad offers a text-by-text-by-text analysis, deliberately linking each section not only to his thesis but to preceding sections. In the conclusion, he briefly sums up his argument, then extends it by showing how the third gothic tale actually modifies Castle's theory, with which the paper had begun. Chad's paper was published in the 1996-97 issue of *Exposé*.

## GORDON HARVEY'S "ELEMENTS OF THE ACADEMIC ESSAY"

1. **Thesis:** your main insight or idea about a text or topic, and the main proposition that your essay demonstrates. It should be true but arguable (not obviously or patently true, but one alternative among several), be limited enough in scope to be argued in a short composition and with available evidence, and get to the heart of the text or topic being analyzed (not be peripheral). It should be stated early in some form and at some point recast sharply (not just be implied), and it should govern the whole essay (not disappear in places).
2. **Motive:** the intellectual context that you establish for your topic and thesis at the start of your essay, in order to suggest why someone, besides your instructor, might want to read an essay on this topic or need to hear your particular thesis argued - why your thesis isn't just obvious to all, why other people might hold other theses (that you think are wrong). Your motive should be aimed at your audience: it won't necessarily be the reason you first got interested in the topic (which could be private and idiosyncratic) or the personal motivation behind your engagement with the topic. Indeed it's where you suggest that your argument isn't idiosyncratic, but rather is generally interesting. The motive you set up should be genuine: a misapprehension or puzzle that an intelligent reader (not a straw dummy) would really have, a point that such a reader would really overlook. Defining motive should be the main business of your introductory paragraphs, where it is usually introduced by a form of the complicating word "But."
3. **Evidence:** the data - facts, examples, or details - that you refer to, quote, or summarize to support your thesis. There needs to be enough evidence to be persuasive; it needs to be the right kind of evidence to support the thesis (with no obvious pieces of evidence overlooked); it needs to be sufficiently concrete for the reader to trust it (e.g. in textual analysis, it often helps to find one or two key or representative passages to quote and focus on); and if summarized, it needs to be summarized accurately and fairly.
4. **Analysis:** the work of breaking down, interpreting, and commenting upon the data, of saying what can be inferred from the data such that it supports a thesis (is evidence for something). Analysis is what you do with data when you go beyond observing or summarizing it: you show how its parts contribute to a whole or how causes contribute to an effect; you draw out the significance or implication not apparent to a superficial view. Analysis is what makes the writer feel present, as a reasoning individual; so your essay should do more analyzing than summarizing or quoting.
5. **Keyterms:** the recurring terms or basic oppositions that an argument rests upon, usually literal but sometimes a ruling metaphor. These terms usually imply certain assumptions - unstated beliefs about life, history, literature, reasoning, etc. that the essayist doesn't argue for but simply assumes to be true. An essay's keyterms should be clear in their meaning and appear throughout (not be abandoned half-way); they should be appropriate for the subject at hand (not unfair or too simple - a false or constraining opposition); and they should not be inert clichés or abstractions (e.g. "the evils of society"). The attendant assumptions should bear logical inspection, and if arguable they should be explicitly acknowledged.
6. **Structure:** the sequence of main sections or sub-topics, and the turning points between them. The sections should follow a logical order, and the links in that order should be apparent to the reader (see "stitching"). But it should also be a progressive order - there should have a direction of

development or complication, not be simply a list or a series of restatements of the thesis ("Macbeth is ambitious: he's ambitious here; and he's ambitious here; and he's ambitions here, too; thus, Macbeth is ambitious"). And the order should be supple enough to allow the writer to explore the topic, not just hammer home a thesis. (If the essay is complex or long, its structure may be briefly announced or hinted at after the thesis, in a road-map or plan sentence.)

7. **Stitching:** words that tie together the parts of an argument, most commonly (a) by using transition (linking or turning) words as signposts to indicate how a new section, paragraph, or sentence follows from the one immediately previous; but also (b) by recollection of an earlier idea or part of the essay, referring back to it either by explicit statement or by echoing key words or resonant phrases quoted or stated earlier. The repeating of key or thesis concepts is especially helpful at points of transition from one section to another, to show how the new section fits in.
8. **Sources:** persons or documents, referred to, summarized, or quoted, that help a writer demonstrate the truth of his or her argument. They are typically sources of (a) factual information or data, (b) opinions or interpretation on your topic, (c) comparable versions of the thing you are discussing, or (d) applicable general concepts. Your sources need to be efficiently integrated and fairly acknowledged by citation - see *Writing with Sources*.
9. **Reflecting:** when you pause in your demonstration to reflect on it, to raise or answer a question about it- as when you (1) consider a counter-argument - a possible objection, alternative, or problem that a skeptical or resistant reader might raise; (2) define your terms or assumptions (what do I mean by this term? or, what am I assuming here?); (3) handle a newly emergent concern (but if this is so, then how can X be?); (4) draw out an implication (so what? what might be the wider significance of the argument I have made? what might it lead to if I'm right? or, what does my argument about a single aspect of this suggest about the whole thing? or about the way people live and think?), and (5) consider a possible explanation for the phenomenon that has been demonstrated (why might this be so? what might cause or have caused it?); (6) offer a qualification or limitation to the case you have made (what you're not saying). The first of these reflections can come anywhere in an essay; the second usually comes early; the last four often come late (they're common moves of conclusion).
10. **Orienting:** bits of information, explanation, and summary that orient the reader who isn't expert in the subject, enabling such a reader to follow the argument. The orienting question is, what does my reader need here? The answer can take many forms: necessary information about the text, author, or event (e.g. given in your introduction); a summary of a text or passage about to be analyzed; pieces of information given along the way about passages, people, or events mentioned (including announcing or "set-up" phrases for quotations and sources - see *Writing with Sources*). The trick is to orient briefly and gracefully.
11. **Stance:** the implied relationship of you, the writer, to your readers and subject: how and where you implicitly position yourself as an analyst. Stance is defined by such features as style and tone (e.g. familiar or formal); the presence or absence of specialized language and knowledge; the amount of time spent orienting a general, non-expert reader; the use of scholarly conventions of form and style. Your stance should be established within the first few paragraphs of your essay, and it should remain consistent.
12. **Style:** the choices you make of words and sentence structure. Your style should be exact and clear (should bring out main idea and action of each sentence, not bury it) and plain without being flat

(should be graceful and a little interesting, not stuffy).

13. Title: It should both interest and inform. To inform - i.e. inform a general reader who might be browsing in an essay collection or bibliography - your title should give the subject and focus of the essay. To interest, your title might include a linguistic twist, paradox, sound pattern, or striking phrase taken from one of your sources (the aptness of which phrase the reader comes gradually to see). You can combine the interesting and informing functions in a single title or split them into title and subtitle. The interesting element shouldn't be too cute; the informing element shouldn't go so far as to state a thesis. Don't underline your own title, except where it contains the title of another text.

## READING DICKINSON: SOME BASIC CONCEPTS

Jay Ladin

These notes summarize some basic concepts which are central to me in dealing with Dickinson's work. Students who took last winter's Emily Dickinson class with me will remember these concepts from presentations I gave; others will, I hope, find them a useful jumping-off point.

### DICKINSON'S DIFFICULTIES:

Emily Dickinson was a deliberately difficult poet. There is ample proof that she knew how to write normal sentences and "normal" poems; since she chose not to, her difficulties are critical aspects of her poems. She didn't WANT us to "know what they mean" in any straightforward sense (see her poem, **The riddle we can guess**): she didn't title her poems, she didn't correctly punctuate them, she left words out--she did everything she could to keep us in a state of wondering and surprise.

In general, I read these difficulties as attempts to find a way to be true in language to the qualities of life she was trying to face: its terrible uncertainty and transience, the fact that we can know what's killing us and still die, the fact that we go on living after tragedies which seem to destroy us, the fact that the meaning of our lives seems to shift and crumble, particularly in the light of death. In any case, these difficulties mean that her poems must be lived through rather than simply read or "understood."

Some of the most common difficulties we find in Dickinson poems are:

**MUSICAL:** Dickinson's poems almost all present a numbingly regular, four-beat line. This basic rhythm is extremely common in songs, particularly (for Emily) Protestant hymns; many of Dickinson's poems can be sung to popular (and hideous) tunes, like the theme song from "Gilligan's Island." The metronomic regularity and almost stultifying predictability of her rhythm is the opposite of the extraordinary linguistic surprises she is so fond of. In general, I think this beat functions to 1) provide a form that both contains and sets off the peculiarities of her poems; 2) provides a musical, sensuous equivalent for her basic existential theme of the tension between constancy and predictability, on the one hand, and mutability and uncertainty, on the other; and 3) musically invokes religious ideas of faith and redemption in ways which can range from the heavily ironic to the wistful and tragic.

**PUNCTUATION:** Dickinson's punctuation often does the opposite of what normal punctuation does--i.e., interrupts flow, creates ambiguities and uncertainties, blurs sentence boundaries, etc. In general, Dickinson's punctuation multiplies possible readings of words, lines and sentences.

**ELIDED SYNTAX:** Like her punctuation, Dickinson's syntax is often the opposite of what we are accustomed to. She leaves out, delays or confuses key grammatical signals, so that we often don't know what kind of a sentence we are in--an exclamation, a question, a straightforward declaration, etc. In fact, Dickinson's syntax often creates a kind of fill-in game, in which we cannot read her sentences without supplying words that she leaves out. Often, we supply these words automatically, without awareness of the options we are choosing between; thus, a key task in reading Dickinson is to become aware of the range of possible readings her syntactical gaps create.

**"BLINDING" SPEED:** Dickinson's poems are like hummingbirds--they move so fast it seems like they're standing still, and then they suddenly zoom off in unexpected directions. She covers huge amounts of ground in very few words, so a lot of what we have to do is SLOW HER DOWN to a

word-by-word speed--like watching a film one frame at a time.

**METAPHOR:** Dickinson was the fastest metaphor slinger since Shakespeare. In addition to traditional metaphors & similes (for example, "oppresses like the heft of cathedral tunes"), she often creates metaphors by implication (e.g., "heft" implies weight in general, and perhaps an ax). She piles metaphors on top of each other so that several are operating at once, and she inverts metaphors, so you only know what metaphor she's using when you get to the end of the sentence. These metaphors can be playful, profound, infuriating, opaque--often all at once. She is also expert at extended metaphors. For Dickinson, metaphor is never far away from riddle; she often makes a game out of metaphor, and is especially fond of metaphors in which one of the terms of comparison is missing (i.e., she tells what something is like, but doesn't tell what the something is).

**COMPRESSION:** A lot of Dickinson's effects come from extreme compression of language and experience. It's always worth remembering that most of her poems present a sliver of ice and expect us to get to the iceberg it came from.

**PERSPECTIVE SHIFTS:** The simple form of most of ED's poems and her frequent use of declarative sentences makes it hard to notice her often extreme and abrupt shifts in perspective; in the space of a single dash, she can shift from extreme closeups to extreme distances, from the core of the soul to the heavens, from this life to the resurrection. These shifts can be playful, humorous and often profound. When you encounter them, it's important to ask what perspective they imply--that is, what is the point of view from which such shifts are possible. For me, this perspective, which is often a peculiar combination of detached omniscience and emotionally charged involvement, is one of Dickinson's major achievements as a poet.

## DICKINSON'S "PRESENCE" IN HER POEMS

The question of the degree to which we can "find" Dickinson in her poems is complex and hotly debated (we will almost certainly be doing some of the debating in this class). In general, it is worth remembering that Dickinson told Higginson that her poems weren't about her but about a "representative person." This poetic commonplace actually hides some pretty complicated dynamics in terms of the poet-poem-reader relationship. A "representative person" is presumably a composite who can "represent" both the poet and the reader; thus, the person we encounter in the poems IS in some way Emily, but presented in a form which is "representative" (i.e., in which readers are intended to see themselves) rather than personal (i.e., in which readers are intended to see Dickinson).

For anyone interested in Dickinson biographically, this is maddening, since you can't just seize on a detail in a poem and reach a conclusion about Emily. But poetically, this is a much more interesting position, because it turns the poems into meeting-places, intersections between the experience of one extraordinary poet and everyone else.

On the one hand, this means that we can test the poems' assertions against our own experiences, see to what extent they name or reveal things about us which (because we lacked the language for them) may have been invisible or incomprehensible; we can agree or disagree with them. Here, language becomes a flash light into the human soul and experience. On the other hand, this also means we can make certain kinds of inferences about Emily herself, not so much biographically as psychologically and spiritually, on the assumption that she must have felt what she describes, at least imaginatively.

In addition, seeing the poems as meeting-places implies Dickinson's belief that the most intimate, terrifying regions of human experience can be encountered THROUGH LANGUAGE, that the poems can somehow bring us to the point of recognizing ourselves in what they describe, by both enacting it AND

creating a detached viewpoint from which we can observe it. The poems are rarely two-dimensional depictions of the soul; they're more like three-D installations.

As a result, one of Dickinson's most characteristic stances is that of phenomenologist: she takes on the voice of a scientific reporter on the general behavior of "the soul" or "the heart." This voice generally discusses the most intimate, delicate, peculiar regions of the soul, ecstasies, agonies and despairs that many of us would never dream of trying to describe, because putting them into words makes them seem false, overdramatized, inauthentic. I think Dickinson was acutely aware of these dangers, and that her phenomenological stance was one of her main techniques for avoiding them. In listening to this voice, we must never forget that its pretense to absolute detachment is belied at every instant by the fact that what it reports can only be known from personal experience.