

Organizing Your Research Paper



●Some General Advice

Your research paper for this course is essentially an exercise in classification. You must take a large body of disorganized, even random material and create some kind of coherent order out of it all by sorting essays into categories and looking for historical patterns.

The best way to start figuring out your thesis and plotting your paragraphs is to complete your annotated bibliography. Put all the articles you have read in chronological order. Then do a one-sentence summary of each article's main critical approach as seen in the Chronological List of Criticism on Emily Dickinson's "My Life Had Stood" in your Xerox book. At the same time, assess critical reputations. Which articles stand out as being most important? Who are the major experts on your work? Do any critics establish article trains as other critics oppose or build on their work?

Now, read over your list starting from the oldest articles on your list. Do you see any patterns? Do these patterns in any way correspond to the critical movements we have studied in this course? Is criticism from the 40's-60's largely New Critical? Do Freudian and/or archetypal approaches begin to creep in during the late 60's and early 70's? Feminist criticism generally begins in the mid-70's; did feminists introduce any new insights? Reader-response is in its heyday mid-70's through 80's. By the 80's, deconstructive approaches begin to be widely used for practical criticism. New Historicism gathers momentum throughout the 80's and becomes widespread by the 90's. What is the most recent criticism about? Does you find examples of multicultural approaches which emphasize previously marginalized perspectives such as lesbian and gay, African-American, and/or postcolonial readings?

You will probably find some correlations to the above schema, but each work has its own idiosyncratic history. Critics are still practicing all the methods we have been studying, so you are likely to find New Critical readings even in the 90's. You also need to be alert to shifts in emphasis as a given kind of criticism evolves. Feminist criticism tends to move from early preoccupation with mimetic concerns, to a focus on the author and her relationship to literary tradition and to other women including lesbian perspectives, to deconstructive and new historicist readings, to an increasing concern with women of color and issues of colonialism.

Unless you are lucky in your choice of work, you will probably not be able to express the thesis for your paper in a single sentence. It may, in fact take almost a whole paragraph. Generally, you will find you need at least a couple of paragraphs of introduction. Often a background paragraph will be followed by a more specific thesis paragraph that maps out the basic organizational structure of the paper and names the major essays to be discussed.

It is pretty close to imperative that your paper be organized historically (To that end, I advise you to put the original date of publication in parentheses the first time you deal with an article in depth.) However, this does not mean you have to be locked into a mechanical, chronological listing. (Such papers are usually pretty bad because the writer has really not made any sense of trends and methods.) What you should do is set up your groups chronologically, based on when the first of that kind of article appeared and when that perspective had its heyday. If your work's critical history is so chaotic that you cannot find any pattern in kinds of criticism, you can also organize by decades, summarizing the main trends in each period.

●Sample Approach to a Thesis Paragraph on “My Life Had Stood”

Criticism on “My Life Had Stood” starts out very slowly. Perhaps due to its difficulty, the first treatments of the poem are short and mostly biographical in orientation, although there are some early stabs at somewhat New Critical interpretations. The first major shift in criticism of this poem came with John Cody’s chapter-long Freudian analysis in 1971 and Robert Weisbach’s advanced New Critical reading in 1972. Between them, these two established “My Life Had Stood” as a central work in Dickinson’s canon and laid the foundations for two of the three approaches that dominate discussions of the poem for the next twenty-plus years: the psychoanalytic and the formalistic. The third main critical approach, the feminist perspective, was inaugurated in 1975 with the appearance of Albert Gelpi’s Jungian exposition and Adrienne Rich’s revision of the myth of Dickinson. Since 1975, accounts of the poem have tended to build on or react against Cody’s seminal insights, the majority of articles on the poem being written by feminist critics who increasingly see the work as a illustration of the conflicts suffered by the woman artist in nineteenth-century America. By the end of the 1980’s a formalistic strategy reappears with the first proto-deconstructive reading. From biographical to New Critical, to psychoanalytic, to feminist, to postmodern, the arc of criticism on this poem is representative of the general trends of literary criticism in the last five decades.

●Scratch Outline of Sections of Paper

1. Biographical/New Critical: Taggard, (1934), Johnson (1955), Anderson (1960)
2. Psychoanalytic: Cody (1971)
3. Advanced New Critical: Weisbach (1972)
4. Feminist Foundations: Gelpi and Rich (1975)
5. Feminist Canon (see poem in terms of power, rage, triumph of creativity): Gilbert and Gubar (1979) Bennett (1986)
6. Feminist Psychoanalytic (chart much more ambiguous sense of contradictions): Keller (1979) Mossberg (1982), Dobson (1983), Pollak (1984) Miller, 1987)
7. Continued New Critical: Cameron (1979) and Porter (1981) and Dobson (1989)