Joel's Paper Advice:

Step-by-Step Instructions for the Draft

TOPIC: Locate a section of the text that interests (or even confuses) you and try to figure out why. Think about what questions, problems, or contradictions it raises. Also consider its methods of communication. Why did the author use this word, character, genre, or literary device and not a different one? Examine the text thoughtfully and objectively, as an archaeologist would examine a strange artifact. Plan to learn something through writing the paper, rather than proving something you have already decided is true.

EVIDENCE: Locate quotations/examples for your topic **before** developing a thesis. Don't start with an argument and look for evidence to support it, like a lawyer preparing for a case. Starting with the evidence forces your arguments to have a textual basis! Your paper will be more sophisticated if you use quotations to generate your arguments rather than simply to support preconceived ideas. You only need to know enough about your topic to recognize what interests you when you see it. If you do have a tentative argument already, look for passages that go against it or modify it, as well as those that support it.

QUESTION: Formulate the question that your paper will address, one whose answer you do not know and would like to learn. Avoid or rephrase questions that ask you to choose between a fixed number of alternatives, especially those that permit a yes or no answer. These questions produce responses that lack detail. Furthermore, they prevent responses that they do not explicitly mention, including the more informed responses that your work ought to generate. Instead of asking, for example, whether a book successfully presents a certain idea, ask how and why the book succeeds. Ask qualitative questions ("How is this idea important?") rather than purely quantitative questions ("How important is this idea?").

HYPOTHESIS: Develop a tentative argument that responds to your question based on an analysis of your evidence. Plan to change it as your ideas develop. By the time it's a thesis, it should explain **WHAT** your chosen topic is, **HOW** the text deals with it, and **WHY** the text treats it in that particular way. (The real meat of textual analysis, and the bulk of your paper, is often the HOW.) Theses should be ***focused***, ***objective***, ***convincing***, and ***interesting***. A thesis is more likely to be interesting if it is **DEBATABLE**. Do not confuse your topic (the problem that interested you) or your question with your thesis. The thesis is an interpretive claim about your topic that you develop after gathering evidence and writing a draft. Don't let the thesis's position at the beginning of the paper fool you; it's really one of the last things you should write.

OUTLINE: Arrange the claims and quotations needed to prove your thesis *logically*, so that each point builds on the previous point, rather than forms an arbitrary list of examples. Cut irrelevant or weak points, and clearly subordinate smaller points to larger ones.

DRAFT: Convert your outline to prose. Each key point should become a topic sentence. Remember that each paragraph represents not a single example but a single (hopefully debatable) claim. Although your brainstorming for the paper moved from evidence to claims, make sure that claims precede evidence in the draft. Once you have finished the draft, let it sit for a while (if possible) before revising. Don't start the draft the night the paper is due! Getting someone else to look at your draft can help clarify things; try trading papers with a classmate.

The Revision Process

STRUCTURE: Read (aloud, if possible) your introduction, the first/topic sentence of each body paragraph, and your conclusion. You should get a rough outline of your paper. Each topic sentence should be a debatable interpretive claim that signals its logical relationship to the previous point with a clear transition—often just one word, such as *although*, *despite*, *however*, *therefore*, *thus*, *because*, *nonetheless*, *yet*, or *conversely*.

Structure Problems and Their Most Common Symptoms:

Problem:	Topic Sentences:	Non-logical Transition Words:
Plot Summary	Tell the story you're writing about.	Then, when, next, after, later
Repetition	List many examples of the same point.	Another, secondly
Randomness	Seem irrelevant to each other.	Interestingly, also

If the paper lacks logical structure, try a *retrospective outline*. Generate a fresh outline of the paper based on what you've actually written. The outline will be much easier to reorganize than the draft itself. Then make sure the paragraphs do what the topic sentences claim!

QUOTATIONS: Support questionable assertions (which should occur in every paragraph!) with quotations. Never quote more than necessary. Give context if needed, but don't paraphrase. Do analyze all quotations. Your paper exists because quotations do not speak for themselves.

GEMS: If you say something brilliant, but it's buried in the middle of your paper, consider restructuring the paper to emphasize it—even to the point of making it your thesis!

FLAWS: Cut out any word, sentence, or paragraph that is repetitive, irrelevant, or unconvincing.

CHALLENGE YOUR CLAIMS: Try the *negation test* on your thesis. Write a thesis opposite to yours. If it sounds stupid, your thesis is too obvious. If not, it should clarify what you want to say. Also make sure your paper answers these questions about the thesis and all other claims:

So What?: What are the implications of the claim? (Ask repeatedly to develop claims!)
Says Who?: Is the claim based on a legitimate authority or piece of evidence?
Who Cares?: Why is the claim important or interesting? What are the stakes?

TERMS: Verify that key analytical terms are precise, consistent, and sufficiently explained.

THESIS: By writing the paper, you have probably learned enough to improve your thesis. Make sure your thesis incorporates the best insights you've gained during the writing process. Your final thesis should be a single, elegant sentence located prominently in the first paragraph. In a first draft, the most articulate statement of your thesis will often appear in or near the conclusion, so you may need to convert your conclusion into an introduction and write a new conclusion.

CONCLUSION: Your conclusion should discuss the larger implications of your thesis, building on the arguments your paper has made and taking them one step further. If your paper has been focused on a "how" question, this is the time to bring up the "why"—i.e. what does the author want us to get from this thing you've been analyzing? Asking "So what?" again is also a good way to attack the conclusion. Don't repeat your introduction. Generally, statements that make sense before reading the paper belong in the introduction, and statements that the reader can only appreciate after reading the paper belong in the conclusion.

TITLE: After the paper is finished, give it a distinctive title that highlights your main point.

Technical and Formatting Issues

POLISH: Make sure your prose is as elegant, powerful, concise, and accurate as possible, not pretentiously formal or sloppily informal. Avoid excessive use of the verb 'to be,' which sounds weak and imprecise, particularly in passive voice ("Xavier is killed"). Try to make the verb the most interesting word in every sentence!
PROOFREAD: Spellcheck. Then look for things the spelling checker can't catch: punctuation, capitalization, grammar, misspellings that are real words, etc. Consult Diana Hacker's *Rules for Writers* or a similar reference whenever you're unsure about something.
Other Tips: Describe events that occur in a literary work in the present tense, even if they also happen to be historical events. Don't use contractions like "don't" in a formal paper. Or incomplete sentences. Or slang, dude. Avoid the words *very*, *unique*, and *masterpiece*.

QUOTATION FORMAT: Integrate quotations smoothly into the grammar of your sentence; together they should form a grammatically correct whole. Use parenthetical citations, not footnotes (unless you want to explain more than just the location of the passage). Quote verse by line number, prose by page number, and Shakespeare by act, scene, and line. Italicize book titles. Place quotes around essay, article, and short poem titles.

Provide no more and no less information than necessary for your reader to locate the passage. You may omit information that the text of your paper makes obvious. The following examples are typical, but different contexts require different kinds of information.

> *Lyric*: "hast thou since / Purpled thy nail" (Donne "The Flea" 19-20). [line numbers]
> *Epic*: "See the mind of beastly man" (*FQ* 2.12.87). [book, canto, and stanza numbers]
> *Drama*: "better have been born a dog" (*Othello* 3.3.363). [act, scene, and line numbers]
> *Prose*: "the beast of most beauty" (Sidney 955). [page number]

Punctuation: Replace irrelevant material in a quotation with ellipses (. . .). Ordinarily, a period or comma goes inside quotes, but in parenthetical citations, the period goes after the parentheses. Enclose necessary editorial insertions in brackets []. Replace line breaks in verse with slashes (/).

Block quotations: For anything longer than 4 lines, indent the whole thing 1" from the margin, use real line breaks instead of slashes (for poetry), omit quotation marks, and place parenthetical citations after the final punctuation mark. Don't change font sizes!

Works Cited: If you use texts other than those on the required reading list, prepare a list of works cited, with complete bibliographic information. Do not indent the first line of each entry, but indent subsequent lines in the entry half an inch. Consult a manual or the instructor for detailed information, but the basic format is:

Smith, John. *My Book*. Los Angeles: Random House, 1990.

PAPER FORMAT: Double-space, all margins 1", no extra space between paragraphs, 12pt proportional-spaced font (like this one, Times). **No formatting tricks.** Number and staple pages.

Goal

Your goal is a polished essay with a thesis that makes a debatable and interesting interpretive claim, topic sentences that make distinct claims (also debatable etc.) that logically lead to the thesis, and body paragraphs that support those claims with close reading and textual analysis.

The "Yes, And / Yeah, But" Exercise

Joel Slotkin

Before class, every student should prepare for the exercise by writing a thesis statement about an agreed-upon text on a sheet of paper. Below this thesis, they should make two columns, one labeled "Yes, and . . .", the other labeled "Yeah, but . . ."

In class, pass each thesis statement around the group, with each person adding responses to both columns. In writing these responses, your goal is to improve the thesis, rather than merely to evaluate it. Responses may be either statements or questions as long as they have substantive content. "Why should I be interested in this thesis?" is not a substantive question. Students should respond to each other's additions, as well as to the original thesis. After receiving a certain number of responses, thesis-writers should retrieve their theses and attempt to revise them.

The Yes, and column is for expanding the thesis. It should

- Suggest a new and more interesting claim that the thesis enables (answering "so what?").
- Ask a meaty "so what?" question. What are the thesis's implications for X issue?
- Provide a useful piece of evidence (answering "says who?").
- Explain the importance of the argument, if it's not obvious (answering "who cares?").

This column should function as a thesis and topic sentence generation tool. If each person adds a claim that builds on the previous claims, you will end up with a thesis that is much more interesting than the original, but that may contain none of the original sentence. However, all of the old claims can become potential topic sentences, since they should logically build on each other towards the thesis in the way that you want topic sentences to do.

The Yeah, but column is for correcting errors or weaknesses in the thesis. It should

- Correct and refine the thesis by suggesting counter-arguments or counter-examples.
- Ask a meaty "says who?" question outlining a problem with the use or lack of evidence.
- Ask a meaty "who cares?" question to challenge a potentially trivial thesis.

Since this column essentially contains critiques of the thesis, it is very important that the responses be respectful (not harsh) and helpful (not vague).

FYI: If you find this exercise helpful, you can try it at home! Get together with a few of your classmates—everybody benefits, so they shouldn't be too hard to convince. Even if you can't arrange a meeting, you can probably make it work over email. As a last resort, you can try it with a friend who has a paper for a different class, or by yourself.