

JEFFREY R. WILSON
ASSIGNMENT FOR *THE SHOW MUST GO ONLINE*

In March 2020, eight days after the World Health Organization declared COVID-19 a pandemic—as schools, offices, and theaters were shutting down—The Show Must Go Online launched its first socially distanced, fully online performance: *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*. Over the next eight months, the group performed each of Shakespeare’s 36 plays online, one per week, in the order they are believed to have been written.



Objectives

This assignment is your opportunity to explore how one grassroots organization responded to the COVID-19 pandemic, how new technology is coming into contact with older literature and culture, and the role of the arts during times of trouble. It is also your opportunity to develop skills for writing a *multi-source essay*.

A frequent essay assignment in college asks students to compare two texts (or events, ideas, objects, etc.)—they might be two works of art, two approaches to a public policy problem, two scientific experiments, two economic theories, or a theory and a new set of data, but the underlying goals are the same. This assignment will familiarize you with some different kinds of multi-source essays and help you develop skills of comparative analysis, which doesn’t simply observe similarities and differences between two texts. Rather, it establishes the significance of those similarities and differences and discusses why they matter.

Readings

- A Shakespearean text of your choice (using the version from the [Folger Library](#))
- [The Show Must Go Online](#) production of that text
- Reference works as needed for historical context
- *Optional*: One additional reading (selected in consultation with your instructor)

Assignment

Write a seven-page multi-source essay that involves one of Shakespeare’s plays and The Show Must Go Online’s production of it.

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Instructions

Your work in our class will prepare you to write a successful paper. From Unit 1, you'll draw upon the strategies for close reading that we've discussed (explications, timelines, conceptual maps, etc.), as well as your ability to pose a question or problem in an essay; to respond with an argument supported by evidence and analysis; and to develop substantive implications. In Unit 2, you'll begin branching out from text to context that can be gleaned from academic reference works. You'll also learn about some different ways of bringing two texts into dialog with each other: the "comparative essay" that discusses some common aspect of two texts; the "historicist essay" that places a text in its proper context; the "lens essay" that uses a theoretical text to unpack a specific example; the "test-a-theory essay" that uses new data to evaluate an existing theory.



Your essay could take many forms. Its center of gravity could be in Shakespeare's time or in ours. Here are some questions you might ask:

- How did the production navigate the limitations of performing while socially distanced?
 - How does the play speak to life today—whether specifically during corona-times, or more generally in the twenty-first century?
 - Beyond the socially distanced aspect, what themes and ideas did the production emphasize?
 - What histories are most needed to contextualize the choices made by the production?
 - How do the scholarly introduction and interludes relate to the performance?
 - How does the chat room add to the production, and what sorts of conversations appear?
 - How does the performance's casting bring new layers of meaning to the text?
 - How do the actors' costumes and settings become significant in the performance?
 - How does the cast and crew conversation at the end of the show add meaning or significance?
 - What philosophical or theoretical ideas might be invoked to help unpack this performance?
- (Note: selection of additional texts must be done in conversation with your teacher)

Don't try to answer all of these questions in your essay. It shouldn't be a list of scattered observations. Instead, use these questions to generate some initial observations about the production, and then narrow your focus to the one line-of-thought that you'd like to pursue for your essay. Your goal is to determine what is most remarkable or significant about your production, and to analyze that aspect in depth.

To help you explore these possible avenues, find your topic, and develop your argument, your Unit 2 response papers will include:

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- *Response Paper 2.1: Comparative Analysis:* By creating a list of parallel passages between two texts, and discussing those passages, you will practice making specific comparisons.
- *Response Paper 2.2: Text and Context:* By looking at reference works, you will practice asking questions and making points that require contextual information beyond “common knowledge.”
- *Response Paper 2.3: A Detailed Outline:* In between the draft and revision stages, you will create a detailed outline for your paper.

Your essay for Unit 2 should exhibit all of the elements of academic argumentation that were discussed in Unit 1. In addition, when you write a multi-source essay you should:

- **Be clear about your *method*:** The introduction of a multi-source essay should make clear that the comparison reveals something we wouldn’t have understood by looking at only one of the texts in isolation. Thus, in a multi-source essay, you’ve got to explain not only *what* you’re arguing but also *how* you’re arguing. In many cases, a multi-source essay succeeds if bringing an additional text into play brings new *terms* to a text that help us see something we wouldn’t otherwise see.
- **Be mindful of the *structure* of your paper:** Multi-source essays pose a structural challenge: how will you weave your analyses of these two texts together? Will you discuss one text in full, and then the other? Or will you jump back and forth between texts? Will you give them equal weight, or will you spend more time with one of the texts? Is your argument “about” both texts together, or is it really only “about” one of the texts? Will you use one text as a lens through which to look at the other text, or will you be doing the same kind of analysis on both texts?

As in a single-source essay, the ideas you offer in a multi-source essay should be your own. No outside sources are required, nor should you consult any scholarship on your primary texts. You may, however, find it necessary to consult some reference works for context that goes beyond “common knowledge.”

Requirements

Your paper should:

- Be seven pages long;
- Be written in MLA style (see [Citing Sources](#) in *The Harvard Guide to Using Sources*);
- Include a cover letter.

