In Their Own Words: Essay #1

Rough draft for peer review 2/6, final draft due 1/30

The basic task: One question that interests historiographers is this: How do the mediums/genres we use influence how we tell history and therefore how we teach, learn, and understand history? Write a three to four page essay that explores this question. Focus your essay on one of the three kinds of histories we’ve read so far: The Witch of Blackbird Pond, Native American stories, or Ishi.

Goals of this assignment:
- To begin considering how history, literature, storytelling, and writing interrelate
- To encourage close, careful reading of our texts
- To hone skills at finding and tightening a specific focus for an essay
- To work on developing a complex thesis and a satisfying supporting argument
- To extend critical thinking through forming and pursuing analytical questions
- To practice integrating quotations as illustration and evidence
- To develop and refine signposting and transition skills
- To practice using the MLA in-text citation system

Brainstorming and critical thinking: One way to brainstorm for an essay is to tease out all the implied and related questions in a complex central question like the one assigned here. This will help you to understand the central question better and help you to focus your exploration/argument more tightly for a short essay like this one. You might even begin by paraphrasing the central questions in your own words and then ask...What are some of the relevant sub-questions?
Structure and signposting:

P.I.E.: This is a helpful way to shape your paragraphs so that they foreground your argument for your readers. P.I.E. stands for Point, Illustration, Explanation—most body paragraphs in analytical essays begin with the writer’s specific new point, offer illustration/evidence for this point, and then explain how the evidence supports the claim.

The E in P.I.E. can also refer to explaining exactly how this paragraph’s new point ties back to and supports the essay’s overall thesis.

Note that this basic structure means beginning body paragraphs with your ideas in your words and closing paragraphs this same way. If you open and close paragraphs with quotations, you often lose this powerful way of controlling your focus on your argument. This is one way to signpost progress on your unfolding argument for your readers.

Also consider using and reusing key words from your thesis as you phrase new points and as you close paragraphs. This also shows readers how you are following through on the promise you made in your thesis.

Your audience: For this first essay, write to this class, to fellow students who have read or heard the texts you’re using to develop your argument. Your readers won’t need major summaries, then, but they will need you to set up each quotation to help them remember the context and situation surrounding the moment you quote. These readers are also pursuing the same central question and have already discussed these texts to some extent. This means they expect your essay to move them beyond our observations and responses in seminar.

Quoting: What are all the good reasons and situations you can think of to quote the source you’re writing about in an academic essay?

For this essay you might well be quoting from only one text. Introduce that text by its full title, author, and genre the first time you refer to it; your readers will assume all that follows is from that text unless you introduce a new one.

The basics of integrating a quotation:

- Start with your claim
- Set up quotation by explaining who’s talking to whom at what point in the story or by filling us in on the focus and context of the surrounding passage
- Quote the necessary material verbatim
- Cite the page # in parentheses at the close of the quotation
- Unpack the quotation—explain how/why it supports and illustrates your claim

Don’t quote more from the passage than you need. Use the set-up to clue us in and choose the most relevant piece to quote verbatim.

We’ll discuss the finer points of quoting such as indenting long quotes, blending quotes, brackets, and ellipses and look at some samples together.

**Beware of losing your focus on your argument for your thesis and sliding into summary!**

**Grading Criteria**
- Strong, accurate and nuanced grasp of the text
- Clear, tight, analytical focus
- Satisfyingly complex thesis
- Developed and supported argument for thesis
- Fluid and persuasive integration of quotation
- Effective organization and signposting
- Accuracy with MLA system of citation
- Clarity and precision at the sentence level
- Mechanics of grammar, punctuation and spelling
- Stylistics including varied sentence construction and sentence length, streamlined prose without unnecessary repetition or verbiage, active verbs, vivid word choice, etc.