

Advice for Essay Award Applicants

Some tips to bear in mind when writing your essay:

Historical context is important when thinking about American literature and culture.

But only include pertinent historical detail in your essays! You do not need to include lots of specific dates or events or author biographies. You do not need to give a comprehensive history of a specific period or process. Only include information that is absolutely necessary.

Your essay should have a coherent and compelling argument. An essay is a piece of persuasive writing...you need to convince your reader that your major claims have merit.

You need to come up with a thesis (hypothesis): this is a succinct claim that you will then substantiate using credible evidence (close readings of primary texts, interaction with secondary source material). A thesis is a definable, arguable claim (something that can be sufficiently backed up by the evidence). It is a provocation, a judgment, a way to engage critically with your primary text. It is NOT a yes or no answer, a topic, an opinion, a question, or a list. Your thesis should be focused and specific. You only have limited words so the argument should not be too ambitious or vague.

Back up all your claims with evidence (for example a quotation from a play, historical figure, or from a secondary source), and then analyse this further (the evidence itself, or how this backs up your claim).

Do not think about an essay as simply an opportunity to put down everything you know about a subject: an effective essay should be an attempt to **convince your reader** of your position. As such, think about how the reader will experience your writing: will they understand the process of your thinking? Remember that you will not be there to explain anything they do not understand, so clarity and coherence are key.

An essay is a **conversation between scholars** – of which you are one! Show your reader how your argument resonates with, converges, or diverges from the arguments of others, but remember your voice and perspective are key – if we simply wanted to know the thoughts of others we would be reading their work instead of your essay!