Dear class,

First, I want to stress that paper-writing is an exercise. The point of a literature degree is not simply to give you a passing familiarity with “western classics” but to teach you how to think with literature. One cannot think with literature without writing--as you probably know from first-hand experience, ideas that seem brilliantly composed in one’s head often turn out discomposed and dull when set to paper. That’s because paper-writing *just is thinking* in its most rigorous form. Now, these papers are short. Their goal is not perfection or finality--the key to all interpretations of *Faustus*, for instance--but to help train you in how to think closely and carefully with literary texts. Ideally, this training will give you with the tools to rock your future lit classes.

There are many different ways to think with literature. But here our goals are modest. Rather than make sweeping philosophical claims based on textual paraphrase, I want you *sweat the details.* Attend to the particularities of the text, and focus on a small portion of it.

Now: the biggest prey. Although professors will differ on details (for example, whether you can use first person--I use it, so you can too), there are some writing basics that will help you throughout your career at BU. I group these basics into two categories: **FORM** and **CONTENT**.

Let’s look at **FORM**.

Thesis paragraph: This paragraph should do two things: present the topic of the paper (e.g., predestination as it is puzzled over, confuted, parodied, affirmed, etc. in scene 7 of *Doctor Faustus*) and then present your argument about that topic. This argument (thesis) should be clear and sophisticated, and in short papers like these, appear around the end of your first paragraph.

HOW TO PICK A TOPIC OR QUESTION: If you are struggling to find a topic, reflect on your own reading experience. Was there a part of the work that confused you, felt jarring, didn’t quite make sense in light of the lecture, made you angry, sad, joyous? Think about your feelings in a critical way--what is going on in the text that made you feel that way? Now reformulate those subjective feelings into an “objective” topic of discussion!

Next, figure out what you want to argue about your question. Here the goal is to **focus, focus, focus!** Be very specific. Don’t try to solve “the meaning” of the play. If you want to tackle “big questions”--highly encouraged--do so through a limited analysis of one or at most two isolated scenes, poetic images, constellation of metaphors, several lines of poetry, etc. Use the isolated textual evidence to prove your “big point”. DON’T advance an interpretation of the whole work, and then choose a bit from the beginning, a bit from the middle, and a bit from the end to “prove” your point.

And finally, please don’t begin your papers by telling me that “human beings since the beginning of time have felt this or done that”. They haven’t, and how would you know anyway? If you can’t start writing without a sentence like this, fine--but remove it when you revise! *Get right to the point*--you only have four mere pages to distill your genius! Don’t waste it warming up.

BODY PARAGRAPHS:

Principle of Selection: *It is unspeakably depressing to read papers that begin their analysis with the first line of a poem or scene of a play.* Rather, choose a part of the text that presents, for you, a compelling occasion for interpretation. For example, a paper on the question of free will in *Faustus* could analyze in a very close and sustained way the Faustus’s contract with the devil, and the context of its signing.

Later paragraph structure:

Topic sentences: these introduce the main idea of a paragraph. For instance, “Doctor Faustus claims to long for knowledge, but in fact in x y z scene we see that he wants power.” Then in the following sentences your produce some examples from the text illustrating your point, and moreover analyze these examples to show why this “topic” is important to your argument.

- *Don’t begin paragraphs with quotations*, because the reader needs to know why you are quoting something before you quote it. Likewise, don’t end paragraphs with quotations, because if you do so, you will have clearly NOT analyzed / interpreted your quotation.

- The overall point of topic sentences is to guide your reader through your argument. The last thing you want is for your reader (me) to be confused about what is going on in your paper. In short, topic sentences give a paper structure, and prevent the reader from getting lost.

Quoting: You simply can’t write a good literary analysis without quoting.

- **Integrating quotations**: Quotations need to be integrated into the text. By “text,” I mean the words you write. By “integrated,” I mean that your quotations should constitute a grammatically coherent part of your sentences. For example: When Faustus says “che sera, sera . . . / divinity adieu” (1.49-50) he demonstrates the profoundly corrosive effects of the theology of predestination. You see here that the quotation is part of the sentence. DO NOT separate quoted material as independent sentences.

- There are many ways to integrate quotations into sentences. ***Some of these ways are laid out here*** http://www2.ivcc.edu/rambo/eng1001/quotes.htm

- **Selecting quotations**: don’t quote huge chunks of text. Only quote what you are planning to analyze! All quotations should be interpreted! Don’t end a paragraph with a quotation, as though the quotation explains itself. It does not.

CONTENT

I will focus here on the thesis paragraph, because articulating your argument in an interesting and sophisticated way is at the heart of paper-writing; indeed, many papers will stand and fall on a strong argument.

Thesis – Every thesis needs to answer a basic question: so what? Why is this argument important? Does it help us read the text in question better? Does it help us better understand Renaissance England? Does it help us better understand ourselves?

I said in class that a thesis must be arguable. But equally important is making your thesis interesting. Now although “interesting” seems like a vague and fuzzy concept, there are some fairly easy ways to construct an interesting argument.

- **Strategy 1**: make it complex. An unsophisticated argument: “I hereby declare the Faustus has no free will!” A sophisticated argument: “The frightening absence of God in *Doctor Faustus* suggests that the scholar is left to his own devices, yet precisely insofar as Faustus explores his powers, he demonstrates that he does not deserve God’s company. In the world of *Doctor Faustus*, to explore one’s humanity is at the same time to destroy it, and in this the play presents a terrible parody of the doctrine of predestination.” You see that claims here are balanced and nuanced: it matters that Faustus has no free will, because it teaches us something about the play.

- **Strategy 2:** historicize your argument. What does that mean? Well, try to understand the text from the point of view of its early readers/writers. What are they trying to achieve? How would they have understood the work of art in question? What effects might such a work have on a society's understanding of itself, on various ideological pressures, and so forth?

Last, the drudgery. The simple, brute fact is that there are basic conventions that you must be able to replicate in order to appear like a competent writer of literature essays. I can't tell you how many fourth year literature students fail to do these things. Don't be these students.

Here are some basic conventions you need to master:

Your title: It should indicate your argument.
Titles: Italicize them. *Doctor Faustus.*
Citations: cite properly. Drama: (Act.scene.line numbers); (1.3.57-58). Poetry (lines); (38-40). Prose: (page number): (57). Citations go outside of the quoted material and are part of the sentence. E.g., *Hamlet* begins with a question, "who's there?" (1.1.1).
Quotations: must be integrated (see above).
However: is not a coordinating conjunction. See here: http://www.iup.edu/writingcenter/writing-resources/grammar/common-problems-with-however,-therefore,-and-similar-words/
Other grammatical errors to watch for: comma splices, subject-verb agreement, definite and indefinite articles (this can be difficult for many Turkish students...it just takes practice. I don't typically count such trivial errors against you anyway)
Semicolons: Semicolons spice up your paper life. But there's a right way and a wrong way in using them. Here's how to use them: http://writing.wisc.edu/Handbook/Semicolons.html