

Argument Synthesis Essay Assignment

Context: This is a final project essay for a regular semester, asynchronous, online College Composition course. The assignment is structured to promote close reading and the habits of scholarly writing. The goal is for students to learn how to join and participate in an ongoing conversation about race, identity, and social injustice.

Assignment

As a starting point, you should read *The New York Times Magazine* feature essay, "America's Enduring Caste System" by Isabel Wilkerson (pdf of the essay is available in Canvas Course Files). As you read the essay, you should be attentive to what Wilkerson is saying and what she is not saying. She is writing about the structures of white power (a hegemony) and the ways in which these structure assign privileges to certain groups on the basis whiteness, while simultaneously marginalizing other groups that are non-white. It's important to note that she does not make a generalizing claim that all white people are racist.

After reading and reflecting on Wilkerson's essay, you should write down all the questions that form in your mind in response to her portrayal of constructs of superiority (white supremacy, white power, upper caste, and etc.). Perhaps there is something Wilkerson says that sparks your interest and you wish she had explored that issue more. What is that issue and in what direction would you want to chase it? Read over your list of questions and identify the one you feel most strongly about; consider this one your thesis question. Next, you should research a newspaper and/or journal article that argues positions that are directly or indirectly related to yours and/or Wilkerson's. Note that while you may agree with Wilkerson on some of her arguments, you are free to challenge some of her positions as well. Your goal in this assignment is to take a position of your own on the subject of 'caste' as explained and argued by Wilkerson.

Note that writing a researched argument is like participating in a conversation. Mike Palmquist explains it this way in *The Bedford Researcher*: "Think about the last time you were at a party, reception, or some other public gathering. When you arrived, you probably walked around, said hello to friends, and listened in on several conversations. Before long, you probably joined a group that was talking about something you found interesting. If you are like most people, you didn't jump right into the conversation. Instead, you listened for a few minutes and thought about what was being said. Perhaps you learned something new. Eventually, you added your voice to the conversation, other members of the group picked up on what you said, and the conversation moved along"(p. 4). In your research paper, you will be adding your voice to an ongoing conversation.

After framing an arguable thesis statement that articulates your position, you should compose a 6-8-page researched essay that argues your own perspective on Wilkerson's "America's Enduring Caste System." Wilkerson's essay is only the spark for you to engage in a conversation about race, power (or lack thereof), identity, gender, and otherness, so your argument should be buttressed by authoritative sources.

Your argument will cite as many sources as you like but five is the required minimum. You should include either Ibrahim Kendi's *How to Be an Antiracist* or Joe Feagin's "Systemic Racism and its White Racial Frame" as one of your five sources.

I don't expect you to formulate a strong thesis and produce an essay right away. The assignment is a step-by-step process that goes through these hands-on activities:

- framing a working thesis.
- researching and annotating sources.
- revising the thesis.
- drafting.
- peer reviewing of drafts.
- editing, proof-reading.

I will be providing guidelines and feedback at each of these stages.

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