American Studies

The strengths of the American studies major include courses offering multiple perspectives on American culture, history, literature, politics, and relationships with countries throughout the world. Because the study of what it means to be "American" both at home and abroad is to understand the often conflicting voices and visions of Americans over time, we encourage our majors to apply for international and domestic off-campus study.

IMPORTANT ELEMENTS:

UNDERSTAND THE QUESTION BEING ASKED
Pay attention to the way it is worded and presented. Be aware, for example, that "evaluate" does not mean the same thing as "describe," and neither is the same as "compare/contrast," or "analyze." What are the key words? Can you properly define them? What sort of evidence is required to respond effectively? If you are developing your own topic, what are the important issues and what questions can you pose yourself?

THESIS
A thesis is an argument which will be presented by the writer. The thesis is in effect, your position, your particular interpretation, your way of seeing a problem. Resist the temptation, which many students have, to think of a thesis as simply "restating" or "summarizing" an instructor's question. The writer should demonstrate originality and critical thinking by showing what the question is asking, and why (so-what) it is important rather than merely repeating it. For example:

"Winifred's decision to abandon her Chinese heritage within the public sphere of inevitable Sino-phobia and prejudice was felicitous, thus establishing her role as a defiant 'trickster hero' who achieved independence and freedom from the shackles of America's discriminating society."

INSTEAD OF

"Winifred's decision to abandon her Chinese heritage created a great uproar among society." → Why did it create a great uproar? What is the significance of her abandoning her heritage?

BODY PARAGRAPHS/EVIDENCE
To make a good argument you must have both a strong central thesis and plausible evidence; the two are interdependent and support each other. Quotes, dates, and lists of details mean nothing by themselves. Your task is both to select the important "facts" and to present them in a
reasonable, persuasive, and systematic manner which defends your position. Since American Studies is grounded in a very interdisciplinary approach, you might find yourself extracting evidence from popular culture to novels and films apart from scholarly journals. Each body paragraph should begin with a claim (a subset of your thesis if you will) followed with evidence and analysis. DON'T FORGET to link your ideas back to your main argument!

HISTORICAL ASPECT
American Studies essays almost always require historical context – unless you’re doing a strict literary analysis for instance. Be aware also that "historical" writing is not exactly the same as writing in other social sciences, in literature, or in the natural sciences. Though all follow the general thesis and evidence model, writing an American Studies paper depends a great deal on situating evidence and arguments correctly in time and space in narratives about the past. Historians are particularly sensitive to errors of anachronism—that is, putting events in an "incorrect" order, or having historical characters speak, think, and act in ways inappropriate for the time in which they were living. Reading the past principally in terms of your own present experience can also create problems in your arguments. Avoid grand statements about humanity in general, and be careful of theories that fit all cases. Make a point of using evidence with attention to specificity of time and place, i.e. "context."

CITATIONS
Unless otherwise stated, most papers follow the standard MLA format. For more information on how to write in-text citations as well as bibliographies, google Purdue OWL or look at Diana Hacker's A Writer Reference (which should have been distributed to you in freshman year).