From Questions to Theses

Appropriate Questions

Eventually you will want to find a few questions that you might try to answer in an essay. Remember: The question you choose to answer has to be one that you can tackle with the data you have (or can get). For the purposes of these short papers, that means your question needs to be one that can be answered by examining closely just your one text. Let me give you an example or two. A question about Black Elk's education or personal habits or eventual conversion to Catholicism can't be answered by the Black Elk text alone. Questions that can be answered with the text alone are questions that have to do with the structure or characteristics of the text. Questions related to the "Active Reading" questions would work best. These are questions such as: How does Black Elk's text itself work? What are his arguments? What are the key concepts, tensions and ambiguities here? What are the key images here and how does Elk use them? How does he describe his religious practices?

Topics and Theses

An academic paper without a thesis would be like a mammal without a spine. The thesis is the main idea or point you want to make. These are different from "topics," which are merely statements of general areas of study. A topic is simply the set of things you're studying. So for instance:

Topic: William James's reflections on experience.
Thesis: William James believed that even pathological experiences could be religiously or morally valuable.

Theses should be original, contestible and even interesting statements of your basic "take" or argument on the text. When I say that a thesis must be original, I mean that it must be your own work. You can't take the thesis from something you've been reading. Your thesis is your original answer to questions that you're asking of the text or argument. In addition to being original, your thesis must be arguable. That is, there must be evidence for it -- and in this assignment there must be evidence for it in the text.
Finally, a thesis must be interesting. Your theses for these short assignments may be less interesting that those you might use on bigger topics or bigger bundles of texts, but you still can have interesting, deep things to say about one text. That is, in fact, the goal of these assignments.

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2 I owe this metaphor to Michael Radich, who wrote the guide for writing in Harvard's East Asian Studies Department.