

Guide to Paper on Vera Brittain, *Testament of Youth*

I have asked you to read this memoir and to compose a paper relating it to important issues concerning the war. I offer you a great deal of freedom with regard to the way in which you choose to go about doing this, though I offer the following by way of guidance and general advice.

Experience suggests that the best essays are the ones that very explicitly raise an analytical question and then seek to answer that question in a focused way using evidence from the text. (Read that sentence again several times; it contains the keys to success.) Given the size of the memoir and all that happens in it, *under no circumstances should you attempt to "retell" the story*; such an effort is doomed to utter, complete, ignominious, pitiful, and dismal failure. What kinds of questions could one ask about the texts? Here are a few that come to my mind, though you are certainly free to develop your own: What does the memoir suggest about the relationship between battlefield and home front? In what ways were the experiences of soldiers different from those of non-combatants? With what sorts of emotions did people experience the war? In what ways did the experiences of men and women differ in the war? What is the significance of Vera Brittain's class background for her experience? What appears to have changed as a result of the war, and what seems to have remained the same? How representative do you think the experiences of Brittain actually are? Why does Brittain refer to "youth" and what kinds of generational tensions does she describe in the memoir? What kinds of transformations did the war engender, and how many of these were definitely dependent on the war itself?

Notice how these questions are sufficiently broad to be interesting, but sufficiently narrow to be answerable in a relatively short paper. Some will involve focusing primarily on the text of the memoir itself; others would probably involve more work in relating that text to the broader developments we have discussed in the course. There are many more questions one could ask, but it is important that you narrow your paper sufficiently by selecting one particular question (or coherent set of questions) that you will attempt to answer. In other words, let the question that you ask guide your reading and thinking about the text.

In your paper, focus on answering the question that you have posed as thoughtfully, fairly, and completely as you can in 4-5 pages. This will mean giving yourself time to think about the paper, selecting evidence from the text(s) very carefully, and reading attentively. Make sure that you clearly identify in your introductory paragraph what question it is that you are asking. Make sure that you provide, at some point in the paper, an answer to that question. Make sure that your paper does not deviate into issues that are not actually related to the question. Make sure that your central claims are documented with appropriate evidence from the memoir itself and other sources. As in all cases and with all writing, organization is absolutely crucial, as are good topic sentences. The best papers will also try to relate other material and sources in this course to the issue that they address in the paper, though the degree to which they do this will vary.

What should you do if you run into trouble? Gnash your teeth and curse the instructor, jumping up and down on a voodoo doll in his image? Or go and see him for help? Hmmm, that's a tough one...