

Some Dos and Don'ts for States of Damage essays

- Focus. Focus, focus, focus. A closely defined topic and a sharply focused thesis will (paradoxically) allow you to say more, in richer detail, than windy generalizations concerning the American way of life, the American Dream (see below), the American psyche and so on.
- About the Dream: Don't get into it unless you're willing to trace the history of the term, and you have a serious argument to make concerning its usage. Casual citations assume altogether too much about a concept that is both well-worn and open to conflicting interpretations.
- Don't attempt to cover too much. Unless you're super-adept, it's difficult to range across numerous texts and case-studies without treating them superficially.
- Reference your work. If you find yourself going on for paragraphs without mention of a secondary source while saying a lot about the USA, it's a sign that you're skating into unsupported territory.
- Zoom in, zoom out. Learning to alternate convincingly between micro- and macro-analysis is key to success in doing literary and cultural studies. Let your generalities do heavy lifting in relation to moments of specific observation and citation.
- Develop your argument. Especially if you're treating a lot of evidentiary material, the temptation is to flit from one topic to the next without regard to the continuity of your analysis. *Build* your argument over the entire length of the essay, not just in the introduction and conclusion.
- Keep the tone objective and avoid pseudo-journalistic commentary. Even in a polemical essay about contemporary material, or one motivated by personal interest, maintaining a degree of scholarly distance enhances the credibility of your argument.
- No matter what your topic, you're jumping in after the party's started. That's OK; it's inevitable. But show that you're aware of what's already been said, and how you're positioning yourself in relation to it. "It's too often a secret that only a minority of high achievers figure out, but the better you get at entering the [critical] conversation by summarizing it and putting in your own oar, the more you'll get out of your uni education" (Gerald Graff, former head of the Modern Language Association).
- Acknowledge alternatives to your own perspective in developing an argument; this is a sign of strength, not weakness.
- Go the extra mile. In order to make a sophisticated argument, you need to press past the level of the obvious and to pose questions that are genuinely difficult to answer or have been hitherto neglected (why?). Every provisional answer or conclusion hides a clutch of further questions, often more interesting than the initial one. Ask them. It's OK not to be sure of your answers initially. We don't mind you thinking on the page.
- Do justice to your work. Prune away extraneous verbiage, learn MLA style for citations and bibliographies, punctuate properly, indent block quotations (remember to omit quotation marks around these), use footnotes or endnotes only for substantive additions to the main body of your text, grasp the difference between which titles require italics (books, movies) and which require quotation marks (short stories, essays). Be consistent in your usage.
- Proofread. Proofread, proofread, proofread.