

Essays - Essay #2

The second essay uses *Clouds* to write about Athens.

The assignment: Write a 3- to 4-page essay that uses three moments from *Clouds* to take a position on the culture, beliefs, and social expectations of classical Athens.

On the website: Quick overview: The *Clouds* Essay (19:52)

What you need to do

● Get ready.

Review the requirements. Review the Requirements for All Papers. This page has important guidance and videos on formatting your document, structuring your essay, and using evidence.

Watch the video. The overview video linked above explains what I want you to cover in the essay and what I'm expecting in terms of arguments, evidence, and structure.

A resource you may find helpful is the Elephant Pamphlet, which gives step-by-step guidance on preparing for and writing a position paper.

● Choose your topic from one of the three prompts below.

Option A

Right and wrong in *Clouds*.

Clouds emphasizes traditional values throughout the play and then ends with violence. Does *Clouds* offer an internally inconsistent message on morality?

Discuss the consistency of the moral argument of *Clouds* by comparing it with the moral argument in the tragedy. Where do both plays stand with regard to the Athenian debate on relative morality (nomos vs. physis)?

Option B

Aristophanes's agenda. The surviving plays of Aristophanes range over a long and turbulent period of Athenian history. Do Aristophanes's opinions and technique change over time?

Discuss the consistency of Aristophanes's approach to writing, and the evolution of his overall philosophy across this most troubled period. What themes and ideas are present in both plays? Is his approach, methodology, or agenda consistent? If not, how does it change?

Option C

Socrates vs. Socrates. The "Socrates" found in Aristophanes's *Clouds* is a deliberate distortion driven by a desire to discredit the real Socrates. What does this version of Socrates have in common with the one depicted in works by Socrates's student, Plato?

Discuss how Socrates was seen by Athenians in their time of strife. What about his behavior and beliefs that caused him to be venerated by some, and yet so feared by others that he was executed? What characteristics of Socrates and his philosophy were most exaggerated by the two authors (either in ridicule or praise), and why?

(What's important to remember is that both versions of Socrates are distortions, twisted in the service of what their authors were trying to say about them—positive or negative.)

● Choose a second work to compare with *Clouds*.

Option A

For the “right and wrong” option, choose a tragedy from the Greek classical period in which morality is a key issue to compare with *Clouds*.

Popular options include:

- *Medea* by Euripides, which involves the title character killing her children to spite her betraying husband, Jason;
- *Elektra* by Euripides, involving the murder of Clytaemnestra by her children for her betrayal of their father Agamemnon;
- *Elektra* by Sophocles; and
- *Antigone* by Sophocles, which has the title character fighting to bury her brother despite a ban by the vengeful king.

There are other possibilities as well.

Option B

For the “Aristophanes’s agenda” option, choose another play by Aristophanes to compare with *Clouds*.

Popular options include:

- *Frogs*, mounted in 405 BCE, 11 years after the revised version of *Clouds*, in which Dionysus, bored with contemporary Athenian plays, travels to Hades to bring back a dead playwright;
- *Birds*, mounted in 414, in which two disaffected Athenians seek to create a utopia called Cloudcuckooland; and
- *Wealth*, mounted in 388, involving the god of wealth and his inability to tell good men from bad.

Any of the 11 surviving plays is fair game. Full texts in English are also available here or here.

Option C

For the “Socrates vs. Socrates” option, choose a work by Plato in which Socrates is a major character to compare with *Clouds*.

Possibilities include:

- *Phaedo*, which has Socrates discussing life and afterlife on the brink of his execution;
- *Apology*, a version of Socrates’s self-defense against charges of irreligion; or
- any of the other dialogs that focus on how Plato wanted to show Socrates’s methods and beliefs. Full texts in English are available here.

● Find three moments from *Clouds* that are strong examples of your topic.

Option A

For the “right and wrong” option, find three incidents from *Clouds* that involve a moral decision or an argument between characters about what the morality of an action.

Compare each of these incidents with a similar (or contrasting) moment in the tragedy you’ve selected.

Option B

For the “Aristophanes’s agenda” option, find three incidents from *Clouds* that reflect either Aristophanes’s opinions or how he makes the play reflect them.

Compare each of these moments with a similar (or contrasting) moment in the other comedy.

Option C

For the “Socrates vs. Socrates” option, find three incidents from *Clouds* that reflect an opinion or behavior expressed by Aristophanes’s version of Socrates.

Compare each of these moments with a similar (or contrasting) moment in the work by Plato.

● Write a 3- to 4-page essay in which you take a position on Athenian culture.

You'll need an Introduction State what you believe *Clouds* shows us about the culture, beliefs, and social expectations of fifth-century Athens in a way that answers the question in the prompt you chose. (This is your thesis statement.)

... a Body Describe and discuss, one by one, each of the three moments you found from *Clouds* and compare with a similar moment from your second work. For each section, discuss what the evidence tells us about classical Athens.

... and a Conclusion. Tie your examples and assertions together and show how they support your overall thesis.

● Finalize your essay.

Citations are important. Make sure your evidence is cited and that you include a bibliography. For how to do citations and bibliographies, see the Research and Citation Center. You will be marked down drastically if your paper is not properly cited.

Optional draft. You may email me an optional draft two weeks before the final due date. It should include most of your paper (at least two-thirds of the final content, with sections to be written described in square brackets). I'll give feedback, but not a grade, to help you refine your final paper.

Double-check the requirements. Make sure your essay meets the Requirements for All Papers for formatting, structure, and evidence, as well as the specifications given above for what's expected for this assignment.

Once you're sure your essay meets the requirements, upload it as DOCX or PDF to Brightspace.