

Major Essay Assignments 2

What Is A Cult?

Webster's dictionary defines the word “cult” in part as “a system of religious beliefs and ritual ... and its body of adherents.” Given this broad definition, everyone who is a member of a church—by far the vast the majority of Americans—could be considered members of a cult. However, such an innocuous definition doesn't even come close to describing the fear and disgust most Americans feel when they hear the word cult. The word itself carries a heavy emotional content, especially in light of the tragedies surrounding the People's Temple, Heaven's Gate, and the Branch Davidians. The suggestion is that this is a group that you should detest, avoid, and fear. The term cult became so emotionally charged that in 1988 the Associated Press decided to avoid the use of the word because it had acquired a pejorative aura; they have since given preference to the term “sect.”

Some people argue that the term cult is used to intentionally devalue people and their faith by creating panic and loathing among the public, and that such practices contribute greatly to religious intolerance in America. During the nineteenth century, for example, members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints (the Mormon Church) were driven from town-to-town and even killed because their beliefs differed radically from the mainstream, and there are many Protestant denominations who still officially label the church a cult. Even today, many members of the Wiccan faith—considered a cult by many—are afraid to practice their religion openly for fear of persecution. Many religious scholars argue that, in reality, the only “crime” of most cults is that they hold different religious beliefs from whoever is doing the attacking.

On the other hand, not all uses of the word cult carry negative connotations. When we speak of “cult films” like *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* or *Shaun of the Dead*, for example, the implication is that these are films that are out of the ordinary and perhaps symbolically represent a kind of sub-culture with which the fan of the film identifies. The same can be said of novels. Because of their off-beat, often dark themes or styles, writers such as Don DeLillo and Philip K. Dick are often said to have large “cult followings” on college campuses.

As you can see, the word cult can have many different and largely unrelated meanings. Your assignment for this unit is to develop your own definition of the word cult and write a well-reasoned essay in which you explore that definition. Though you are certainly welcome to pick your own topic, some possible essay topics might include:

- A religious group becomes a cult when...
- "X" is an example of a cult because... (Possible values for X: fraternities/sororities, fundamentalist Christian groups, fan groups [Trekkies, gamers, etc.], New Age religions, Scientology, UFO groups, 12-step programs, etc.)
- No one ever joins a “cult.” People join interesting groups that promise to...
- Film (or novel or writer) "X" is a cult film (or novel or writer) because...
- I never thought I was a member of a cult until...

Length: 5-7 pages.

Due dates

Thr., Mar. 5: Peer draft. (bring 3 copies to class.)

Thr., Mar. 12: Final draft.

Sources

Four. Of these four sources, two must come from the library.

In order to demonstrate your ability to incorporate sources into your essay, be sure that you include: (a) referenced paraphrased and summarized information, and (b) brief in-text quotations.

Submitting Your Work

Unit essays must be submitted in a plain, 2-pocket folder with your name and course and section number clearly written on the outside. Plastic folders or folders containing school logos will not be accepted. The following items must be included inside your folder:

- Final draft of essay, stapled, in a pocket by itself.
- First draft of essay I reviewed (if applicable).
- Completed peer evaluation forms.
- Essay grade sheet.

Penalties: Failure to turn in a peer draft on the due date will result in a one letter grade penalty on your final paper. Failure to turn in peer evaluations on the due date will result in a one letter grade penalty on your final paper. If late, your final draft will be docked one letter grade for each calendar day it's late. Folders missing any other of the above-mentioned items will be considered incomplete and will be docked one letter grade per calendar day late until all the items have been received.

Grading Criteria

When assigning grades, I reserve "A" for exceptional papers -- you do not get an A on a paper simply by addressing the paper topic in a standard way and avoiding mechanical errors.

Your essay will be graded according to the following three criteria:

Invention

- *Introduction and Thesis:* Are these components of your essay clearly written, easily identifiable, and effective in presenting the topic, discussing its significance, and providing direction to the paper as a whole?
- *Accuracy, Wording, and Research:* Have you used the required sources to support your argument, and do you express their concepts fairly and accurately? Have you integrated quotes smoothly? If you are paraphrasing, do you use your own words yet still remain faithful to the author's original meaning? Have you expressed your ideas clearly and concisely? Is the essay in your own words? NOTE: Failure to meet research requirements may result in an 'E' for the essay.

- *Criteria:* Have you clearly and defined necessary terms? Have you illustrated your criteria with specific examples and, if necessary, contrasting examples? Have you established ethical, logical, and/or emotional reasons (evidence) in support of your thesis?
- *Revision:* Are there substantial changes between the final version and the draft of the essay? Does your final version meet the length requirements? NOTE: Failure to meet the length requirements may result in a failing grade.

Organization

- *Beginning:* Have you offered an introduction in which you explain the issue and show why it is relevant? Have you presented a clear thesis that guides and unifies the essay?
- *Middle:* Are your paragraphs focused and well developed? Do your paragraphs contain topic sentences? Have you revised for clarity and worked on eliminating wordy, unclear, and/or repetitive areas in your essay? Have you included transitional words between sentences and paragraphs to make your ideas flow more smoothly?
- *End:* Do you offer a conclusion that does more than merely repeat your major ideas?

Style

- *Format:* Does your paper adhere to MLA format, including font and point size? Have you correctly cited from your sources and inserted a parenthetical citation after each quote? Have you introduced quotes in an effective way? Have you included a "Works Cited" page?
- *Tone:* Is your tone appropriate for the chosen audience?
- *Grammar/Sentences:* Is your paper free from grammatical errors such as sentence fragments, fused sentences, comma splices, mixed constructions, apostrophe errors, subject/verb and pronoun/antecedent disagreement? Is the essay free from spelling errors?