Essay #1 Directions
English 320
Wheeler

Due Date: As listed in the syllabus for each essay.

Length: Essay #1 is a typed or word-processed essay of 5-7 pages not counting the Works Cited page. (That's about 1250-1750 words if you use a large monospatial font.)

Format: The essay should be typed or word-processed on high quality paper (no onion-skin paper or semi-transparent bond paper, please). Aim for a professional appearance. It should be written in the Modern Language Association format (MLA). You may find it useful to peruse the MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers, 5th edition, for more information. A sample first page and sample Works Cited page can be downloaded in PDF format from the class website as well.

In the upper left-hand corner of the first page, please include the following material flush against the left margin: your name, your teacher's name, the course, and the due date (not necessarily the date you finished the work):

Jane Doe
Professor Wheeler
English 320
18 January 2003

After typing this material in the upper left-hand side of the first page, you should double-space and center the title of your composition. Be original. Be memorable. Make your title count. Note that the title of your own unpublished essay need not be underlined, italicized, or placed within quotation marks. Follow normal conventions for capitalization. (See MLA Handbook, pages 73-74.)

The body of your essay should be double-spaced and left justified rather than fully justified. Maintain one-inch margins all around the essay. On every page including the first, insert a header with your last name and the page number. By viewing "header" on most word-processors, you can set up your document to automatically include such a header on each page.

Our first essay focuses on the medieval literature in the two languages leading up to our beloved Middle English: Anglo-Saxon (Old English) and Norman-French.

Option #1: Supernatural Experiences
In both the Lais of Marie de France and the Beowulf narrative, human society exists side-by-side with a supernatural world. These supernatural beings may be a source of malicious mischief (as in Beowulf), or a font of romance and passion (as in Guigemar, Lanval and Yonec), but they always serve as an alien otherness to compare and contrast with human behavior. In either case, the juxtaposition of the human world and the alien beings serve to reveal truths about humanity and about the civilizations of the writer. Pick one or two specific supernatural beings from either the Lais or Beowulf and analyze human interaction with these creatures. What does the poet teach us about the Anglo-Saxons tribes, Norman French culture, or humanity more generally by creating this interaction?

Option #2: Setting
In class, we discussed how Beowulf's mother's underwater lair serves as an inversion of the warrior's mead-hall. This example shows how a setting can function symbolically, and how it can echo another location in a meaningful way. Explore the purpose of setting in any one narrative we have read thus far except the lair at the bottom of the lake. Pick a particular scene in which the location of the characters' interactions provides us with additional insight or understanding about the meaning of the poem. Explicate the implications of this setting. Does it serve a symbolic or allegorical function? Does it connect with a character or group of characters? What connotations did such a setting have for medieval readers generally?

Option #3: Celtic and Norse Influences
No culture exists in a vacuum. One topic that we have not discussed at length in is the presence of Celtic motifs in the Anglo-Norman Lais and the presence of Norse influences in the Anglo-Saxon Beowulf. Focusing either on Celtic influences or on Norse influences, and armed with research materials, identify the influence and elaborate upon how it alters our understanding of either Beowulf or the Lais.

Final Tips:
1. The options above are prompts only. It is your responsibility to develop a clear thesis (i.e., an argument that your paper will prove or disprove). Focus on that narrow thesis, rather than wandering from point to point. State that thesis explicitly somewhere in your essay; I should not have to guess what your argument is from context alone.
2. Grammar and neatness count. Because faulty grammar can lead to miscommunication, and sloppiness detracts from the author's ethos in the paper, grammar and neatness are in many ways inseparable from content. Proofread essays before submission. Since you will probably be using a word-processor, remember to use the spell-check function. Theoretically, your paper should be completely free of spelling errors.
3. I will not accept papers that are not attached together using paper-clips or staples. Dog-earing copies together is unacceptable.
4. Start early, rather than churn out inferior thinking on the night before the essay is due.
5. Do not make unsupported assertions. If you claim something exists or occurs, support that claim with evidence (as such as quotations) drawn from the text or historical research.
6. Avoid excessive summarizing of the poems. Assume I have already read them, and I don't need you to tell me the entire tale in miniature. Instead, stick to close reading of specific passages.