

Humanistic Research Questions

- The **humanities** constitute fields of study that look at the ways in which humans have created meaning through their thoughts, their actions, and their creations. Humanistic research questions usually ask *how or why* certain meanings are generated from human activity (that is, **interpretive** questions).
- Philosophical research questions consider the way human thought works in practice, as well as evaluating the logical and ethical principles that underlie our thinking, our actions, and the world around us.
- Historians seek to understand past human actions and events in terms of their human significance both for the participants and the interpreters.
- Literary critics, art historians, and musicologists study the meaning of different artifacts that humans have made and are especially interested in how their “madness” creates meaning. Literary scholars (like Izenberg) begin with the premise that meaning resides in the rhetorical components of a text, in the varying meanings of language itself. They, therefore, ask questions about how the language of the text shapes meaning. (*HCC Writer’s Handbook* 5-12)

Testing Your Notetaking Skills (again)

Imagine that you are Professor Izenberg, composing your lectures on the *Iliad* over the summer. In small groups of three or four, use your notes from today's lecture to generate specific, *how* and *why* questions that Izenberg might have posed as he began to examine how the rhetorical components of this text shape its meaning and our understanding. I expect for you to generate at least three detailed questions that you can then in turn answer based on the claims that Izenberg made in lecture today. You should also be able to identify what evidence he used to answer the questions you pose.



Sample humanistic research questions that Izenberg might pose:

- ✓ How can we understand the role of the Gods in the *Iliad* while recognizing the fact that human beings do indeed deliberate and exercise choice in the course of the narrative?
- ✓ Why are questions of agency amplified in the context of war?
- ✓ How does Homeric poetry make visible and tangible the tensions within the culture of Ancient Greece during the Dark Ages?
- ✓ How is authority legitimated in this text, and why does Thersites represent a crisis in the process by which authority is assumed?
- ✓ How is social value determined in the culture depicted in the *Iliad*? Why do certain values assume such importance in this particular context?
- ✓ How and why does Homeric moral psychology differ from the moral psychology of our contemporary culture?
- ✓ How does Achilles embody both the values of and the contradictions inherent to the heroic culture of the *Iliad*?

Book 2, Lines 245-324

The armies took their seats, marshaled into ranks.
But one man, Thersites, still railed on, nonstop.
His head was full of obscenities, teeming with rant,
all for no good reason, insubordinate, baiting the kings—
anything to provoke some laughter from the troops.
Here was the ugliest man who ever came to Troy.
Bandy-legged he was, with one foot clubbed,
both shoulders humped together, curving over
his caved-in chest, and bobbing above them
his skull warped to a point,
sprouting clumps of scraggly, woolly hair.
Achilles despised him most, Odysseus too—
he was always abusing both chiefs, but now
he went for majestic Agamemnon, hollering out,
taunting the king with strings of cutting insults.
[...] (106-8)

Book 2, Lines 573-583

Sing to me now, you Muses who hold the halls of Olympus!
You are goddesses, you are everywhere, you know all things—
all we hear is the distant ring of glory, we know nothing—
who were the captains of Achaea? Who were the kings?
The mass of troops I could never tally, never name,
not even if I had ten tongues and ten mouths,
a tireless voice and the heart inside me bronze,
never unless you Muses of Olympus, daughters of Zeus
whose shield is rolling thunder, sing, sing in memory
all who gathered under Troy. Now I can only tell
the lords of the ships, the ships in all their numbers! (115)

Book 4, Lines 485-528

With that challenge
he sprang from his chariot fully armed and hit the ground.
A terrific din of bronze rang from the captain's chest,
striding toward attack, Fear would have gripped
the staunchest man and made his knees give way.

[. . .]

and miles away in the hills a shepherd hears the thunder—
so from the grinding armies broke the cries and crash of war. (158-60)

Book 9, Lines 362-419

All this . . .

he would extend to you if you will end your anger.

[. . .]

But now that he's torn my honor from my hands,
robbed me, lied to me—don't let him try me now.
I know *him* too well—he'll never win me over! (261-63)