

Julius Caesar

Sample Analytical Paper Topics

The following paper topics are based on the entire play. Following each topic is a thesis and sample outline. Use these as a starting point for your paper.

TOPIC #1

“Power tends to corrupt and absolute power corrupts absolutely.” This statement by Lord Acton, sent in a letter to Bishop Mandell Creighton on April 5, 1887, provides the basis for understanding the effects of power on the heads of state, and it furnishes an insight into one of the main themes in the play *Julius Caesar*.

Write a paper that shows how power affects the characters, the events, and the outcome of the play.

Outline

- I. Thesis Statement: *Julius Caesar is a play that illustrates the theme expressed by Lord Acton that power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely. This can be illustrated by studying the actions of the main characters in the play.*

II. Background

- A. Caesar, Pompey, and Crassus rule Rome (triumvirate)
- B. Power struggle between Pompey and Caesar
- C. Civil war ends with the death of Pompey
- D. Caesar's rise to power

III. Concern for the Republic and Caesar's growing power

- A. Flavius and Marullus disperse the crowd to minimize Caesar's power base and protect the Roman Republic
- B. A view of Caesar's power on the feast of Lupercal, how he deals with Calphurnia and Antony

IV. The Conspiracy against Caesar

- A. Cassius and Brutus discuss what must be done to prevent Caesar from destroying Rome
 1. Cassius—wants personal power
 2. Brutus—wants the good of Rome
 3. Cassius exploits his power over Brutus by forging letters that will sway him
- B. Brutus joins the plot to prevent Caesar's abuse of power and Brutus assumes the leadership, imposing his wishes on the others
- C. The conspirators have the power of life and death in Rome and they decide who will live and who will die

V. The Assassination

- A. Caesar's death causes a power struggle in Rome as the conspirators become the new leaders
- B. Brutus' funeral speech and his rise to power as the crowds want to make him king
- C. Antony's funeral speech and his rise to power unleashing the mob on Rome for his personal reasons

VI. The Aftermath in Rome

- A. Antony, Octavius, and Lepidus are changed by their newfound power
 - 1. They make a death list to consolidate their power in Rome
 - 2. They change Caesar's will and his generous legacy to Rome
 - 3. Antony's abuse of Lepidus for his political ends
- B. The growing conflict between Antony and Octavius

VII. The Aftermath in Greece

- A. The conflict between Brutus and Cassius
- B. The impending war

VIII. The Civil War

- A. The deaths of Brutus and Cassius
- B. Antony and Octavius rise to power

TOPIC #2

Any analysis of *Julius Caesar* would not be complete without considering the matter of subjective interpretation. Throughout the play characters and events are judged not by what is actually happening, but by one or more characters' interpretation of these things.

Write a paper that examines these subjective interpretations of characters and events throughout the play, providing examples to support your conclusions.

Outline

I. Thesis Statement: *Understanding Julius Caesar depends on realizing that the audience's attitude toward the characters, and the events of the play, are not rooted in reality, but in a subjective interpretation of reality.*

II. Act I

- A. Flavius and Marullus paint a biased and negative picture of Caesar based on their support of Pompey
 - 1. What did Pompey do that was so good?
 - 2. What did Caesar do that was so bad?
- B. Caesar is revealed in his exchanges with Antony, Calphurnia, and the soothsayer
- C. Cassius describes Caesar to Brutus as physically weak and unfit to rule Rome
 - 1. Cassius saved Caesar's life while swimming
 - 2. Caesar cried like a sick girl in Spain
- D. Caesar's assessment of Cassius as a dangerous man is the opposite of Antony's opinion that Cassius is "a noble Roman, and well given." (Act I, Sc. 2)
- E. Caesar's behavior off stage is not seen by the audience but by Casca's biased account of events at the Coliseum
- F. Cassius describes Caesar to Casca as a monster, whose abuse of power is shown by the gods sending supernatural omens and storms to warn Rome

III. Act II

- A. Brutus bases his decision to kill Caesar not on what he has done, but on what he might do
 - 1. Cassius has been influencing him for a month
 - 2. Brutus has received many anonymous letters opposing the tyrant Caesar
- B. The conspirators assessment of Antony is also subjective
 - 1. To Cassius he is a danger to be eliminated
 - 2. To Brutus he is only a “limb of Caesar” (Act II, Sc. 1)
- C. The interpretation of supernatural events
 - 1. Calphurnia’s dream is a sign that Caesar will be killed
 - 2. Caesar sees it as a warning from the gods that he is a coward if he stays at home
 - 3. Decius interprets it as Caesar being the strength, power, and lifeblood of Rome and it is his view that influences Caesar

IV. Act III

- A. Caesar’s opinion of himself as “constant as the Northern Star,” (Act III, Sc. 1) incapable of changing his mind or making mistakes, although he has made several mistakes in judgment to this point
- B. To Cinna and Cassius the death of Caesar is a source of “Liberty, freedom and enfranchisement” (Act III, Sc.1)
- C. To Antony, his death is the “ruins of the noblest man / That ever lived in the tide of times.” (Act III, Sc. 1) and the first step on the path to anarchy and bloody civil war
- D. Brutus’ funeral speech attempts to cast Caesar an ambitious tyrant who would have destroyed the Republic and made slaves of everyone
- E. Antony’s funeral speech shows a compassionate Caesar, who cried for suffering Romans, and a generous man who left money and land in his will for every citizen
- F. Antony’s account of the murder of Caesar, although he did not witness it, stirs the angry mob to want revenge

V. Act IV

- A. Antony’s assessment of Lepidus as being unfit to rule Rome
- B. Octavius’ opinion that he is a “tried and valiant soldier” (Act IV, Sc. 1)
- C. Cassius’ reasons for not going to Philippi
- D. Brutus’ opinions that they must go or lose the opportunity for success

VI. Act V

- A. In the parley before the battle both sides see themselves as true Romans and the others as the traitors
- B. Pindarus gives his subjective account of Titinius being captured by the enemy, and it results in Cassius’ death
- C. Antony’s opinion of Brutus as “the noblest Roman of them all” (Act V, Sc. 5) is in sharp contrast with his earlier view of Brutus as a murderer and flatterer

TOPIC #3

Superstition, in the opinion of Polybius, a Greek writer, was an important force in Rome and it plays a major part in *Julius Caesar*. Many decisions in the daily lives of the Romans were referred to the augurers, who could determine the will of the gods through ritual and sacrifice. Augurers decided the Roman calendar, and what days, were and were not suitable for conducting business. Caesar himself was an augurer, a position of influence in Roman society.

Write a paper that examines Roman superstition, and show the effects it had on the events and the outcome of the play.

Outline

- I.** Thesis Statement: *Superstition is an important factor in determining the events and the outcome of Julius Caesar, a significant force throughout the course of the entire play.*

II. The Feast of Lupercal

- A. The play begins on a festival in honor of the god Pan, the god of fertility
- B. Caesar indicates his superstition by directing Antony to touch Calphurnia during the race, to make her fertile and enable her to provide Caesar with an heir
- C. The soothsayer provides a look into the future and a warning for Caesar

III. The Omens of Nature

- A. Casca's account to Cicero of the unnatural events he has witnessed, which he interprets as the gods in a state of civil war, or intent on destroying the world
- B. Cassius's account of the message from the gods, warning Rome of Caesar's growing power and the threat he poses for the Republic

IV. The Sacrifice of the Augurers

- A. Finding no heart in the beast is a warning to Caesar to remain home
- B. To Caesar it is a rebuke from the gods that he is a coward if he does not go out

V. Calphurnia's Dream—Caesar's statue spouting blood

- A. Calphurnia's interpretation it is a warning of Caesar's impending death
- B. Decius' favorable interpretation of the dream as a sign of Caesar's stature in Rome and the respect all the Romans have for him

VI. Signs before the Battle

- A. Caesar's ghost, an omen of Brutus' death
- B. The eagles on the ensign replaced by ravens and kites, a sign that Cassius and Brutus will lose the battle and die