Essay 1: Examining Received Ideas

Topic: In this essay, you’re asked to examine “the standard view” on a topic of your choice, question it, analyze it, and persuasively express your own view on it.

Here are some prompts to get you started on identifying standard views:

"Americans today believe that...”
"Conventional wisdom has it that.”
"Common sense seems to dictate that.”
"The standard way of thinking about ___ is...”
"It is often said that...”
"My whole life I have heard it said that...”
"You would think that...”
"Many people assume that...”

"I've always believed that...”
"When I was a child, I used to think that...”
"Although I should know better by now, I cannot help thinking that...”
"At the same time that I believe _____, I cannot help thinking that...”
"Everybody knows that...”
"My mother always told me...”

You can choose almost any topic you like for this, as long as you can identify some conventional wisdom (a commonly held belief) that’s worth debating. See if these categories from Randall VanderMey’s College Writer give you a good idea for a subject:

Current affairs: Recent trends, new laws, emerging controversies in the media
Burning issues: What issues related to family, work, education, recreation, technology, the environment, or popular culture do you care about? Which issue do you want to confront?
Dividing lines: What dividing lines characterize the communities you belong to—what issues set people against one another? Religion, gender, money, class, sports?
Fresh fare: Can you think of an unexpected topic, like barbed versus smooth fishing hooks?

There are a few topics that I will ask you steer clear of, though, mostly because so many of us have debated and considered them so thoroughly already and have pretty fixed ideas on them, so it’s hard to write a really engaging, interesting, fresh argument on them: you cannot write about abortion, capital punishment, gay marriage, legalization of marijuana, or the war in Iraq for this essay.

Your essay must say something. You are free to agree, disagree, or partially agree/disagree with the conventional wisdom, as long as you have clear position. Don’t only tell us what other people say; tell us what you say and why you think as you do. What will really be interesting is what only you can tell your reader: how to see your subject as you do, through your eyes. You will need a clear claim (thesis), and the whole essay should be organized around clearly supporting that claim with logic, persuasion, and experience. Your claim must also be debatable: that is, something that the reasonable person could possibly disagree with. Therefore, “child abuse is wrong” would not be a good thesis: who would argue?

Keys for success: Respect the opposition, or the “standard view” that you’re analyzing. Ground your argument in a clear understanding of the opposition’s stance. Develop a credible counterargument. What shortcomings, blind spots, and fallacies do you find at work in the standard view? What new evidence can you bring to the discussion?

Format: Use one inch margins and 11 point font. You are not required to use any sources for the essay, but if you do, they should be cited in MLA format; that means putting a Works Cited list at the end of the essay, and putting the author’s name and the page number (if there is one) in the text after you quote, paraphrase, or summarize someone else’s words or ideas. There are no minimum or maximum number of pages for the assignment; just write as much as you need to to make it a good essay.

Peer/Instructor: When the peer draft is due, that means that you have to bring a first (or rough) draft of the essay to class to use in peer review; another student will read it but it will not be graded. When the instructor draft is due, bring in the final draft of the essay to give to me; this is the draft I’ll read, respond to, and grade. You must attach your peer draft, any peer review you’ve received; anything that lead up to the final product.
**Grade Weight:** This essay is worth 7% of your grade for the course. (Your other three essays will each be worth 11% of your grade.)

**Audience:** Your audience is your fellow students and your instructor.