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## English 521 - Much Ado About Nothing Literary Essay Topics

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The final exam will require you to prepare to write a major essay. Since the study of English encourages students to plan and prepare good work, each student is REQUIRED to prepare an outline for ONE of the following essays below. Outlines must be prepared using the style learned during the research process. Students then take a GOOD COPY of their outline to the examination and use the outline to produce a literary essay of approximately 1000 words which examines (and uses passages from the play) and supports their chosen topic.

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### The Function of Deceit

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A central theme in the play is trickery or deceit, whether for good or evil purposes. Counterfeiting, or concealing one's true feelings, is part of this theme. Good characters as well as evil ones engage in deceit as they attempt to conceal their feelings: Beatrice and Benedick mask their feelings for one another with bitter insults, Don John spies on Claudio and Hero. Who hides and what is hidden? How does deceit function in the world of the play, and how does it help the play comment on life in general?

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### The Violence of Language

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Language in Much Ado About Nothing often takes the form of brutality and violence. "She speaks poniards, and every word stabs," complains Benedick of Beatrice (Act Two Scene One, line 216). Find examples of speech and words representing wounds and battles in the play. What do Shakespeare and his cast of characters accomplish by metaphorically turning words into weapons? What does the over-use of all this violent language signify in the play and the world outside it?

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### Examining Don Pedro

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In some ways, Don Pedro is the most elusive character in the play. He never explains his motivations—for wooing Hero for Claudio, for believing Don John's lie, even for setting up Beatrice and Benedick. He also seems to have no romantic interest of his own, though, at the end of the play, without a future wife, he is melancholy. Investigate Don Pedro's character, imagine the different ways in which he could be portrayed, and ascribe to him the motivations that you believe make him act as he does. Why is he so melancholy? Why does he woo Hero for Claudio? Is he joking when he proposes to Beatrice, or is he sincere? Why would Shakespeare create a character like Don Pedro for his comedy about romantic misunderstandings?

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### Male & Female Honor

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In this play, accusations of unchaste and untrustworthy behavior can be just as damaging to a woman's honour as such behavior itself. Is the same true for the males in the play? How is a man's honor affected by accusations of untrustworthiness or unfaithfulness? Do sexual fidelity and innocence fit into the picture in the same way for men as it does for women? Examine the question of honor and fidelity as it relates to four male characters in the play: Benedick, Leonato, Claudio, and Don Pedro. What could Shakespeare be saying about the difference between male and female honour?

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### Shakespeare's Point of View

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Each of Shakespeare's plays contains some of his own point of view or prejudices on the subjects and themes. In Much Ado About Nothing, discuss (using examples from the play) how Shakespeare allows his own point of view enter into his writing and his characterizations.

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### Feminism Defeated?

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Discusses the idea that from the standpoint of a modern feminist sensibility, Beatrice and Hero's acceptance of marriage can be interpreted in a highly negative light.

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### Love Stories

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Shakespeare interweaves two love stories in Much Ado About Nothing: the Claudio-Hero plot and the Benedick-Beatrice plot. Write an analytical essay on the ways in which they parallel or counterpoint each other in characterization, in dialogue, and in plot structure.

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### Appearance vs Reality

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Appearance versus reality is the major theme in Much Ado About Nothing and the lesson of the play is to learn to discriminate properly and to estimate everything at its true value. Write an analytical essay on mistakes/mis-notings that take place in this play, as well as the way in which they are resolved; include the motifs, imagery, dialogue, and theatrical devices that Shakespeare employs to explore this theme.

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### Analysis of a Scene

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Analyze any one scene in Much Ado discussing sections and subsections, alternating groups of characters, and thematic concerns.

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### The Ideal Couple?

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Are Beatrice and Benedick an ideal couple? Is the fact they are roughly equal in wit and intelligence significant? Do you find their attitude toward love and their courtship more satisfying than Claudio and Hero's? Why or why not?

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### Character Studies

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Discuss the character of Beatrice and/or Benedick. Is Benedick 'less than a man' because he abandons his male friends? Is Beatrice a harsh woman or a shrew because she is not obviously submissive? In what ways do Beatrice and Benedick challenge traditional sex roles? Is the challenge a healthy one?

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### A Choice of Your Own

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After getting 'schooled' on some of the literary writing techniques, perhaps you will want to choose your own topic from Much Ado About Nothing. These choices MUST have Coffin-approval on the Monday morning prior to exams.

### What Makes It Good?

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- An Argument,
- A Debatable Thesis Statement,

### Which Topics Are Good Ones?

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If the topics provided don't do it for you, then you are more than welcome to come up with your own (Coffin approval required, of course).

### If that's your plan, here are a few things to keep in mind:

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- The best topics are ones that originate out of your own reading of a work of literature, but here are some common approaches to consider:
- A discussion of a work's characters: are they realistic, symbolic, historically-based?
- A comparison/contrast of the choices different authors or characters make in the work.
- A reading of a work based on an outside philosophical perspective (Ex. how would a feminist read *Much Ado*?)

### More Considerations:

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- A study of the sources or historical events that occasioned a particular work (Ex. comparing Shakespeare's Julius Caesar to actual history.)
- An analysis of a specific image occurring in several works (Ex. the use of food imagery in certain plays, poems, novels)
- A "deconstruction" of a particular work (Ex. unfolding an underlying racist world view in Joseph Conrad's Heart of Darkness)
- A reading from a political perspective (Ex. how would a Marxist read William Blake's London?)

### Literary Terms to Remember

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Many literary terms describe how an author communicates his or her ideas. Look through the text and try to identify some of methods Shakespeare uses to convey the patterns of ideas you are most interested in. The following terms will help you express the methods you see:

- Characterization:** the author's expression of a character's personality through the use of action, dialogue, thought, or commentary by the author or another character.
- Conflict:** the struggle within the story. Character divided against self, character against character, character against society, character against nature, character against God. Without it, there is no story.
- Dialogue:** vocal exchange between two or more characters. One of the ways in which plot, character, action, etc. are developed.
- Imagery:** the collection of images within a literary work. Used to evoke atmosphere, mood, tension. For example, images of crowded, steaming sidewalks flanking streets choked with lines of shimmering, smoking cars suggests oppressive heat and all the psychological tensions that go with it.
- Point of View:** the vantage point from which the author presents action of the story. Who is telling the story? An all-knowing author? A voice limited to the views of one character? The voice and thoughts of one character? Does the author change point of view in the story? Why? Point of view is often considered the technical aspect of fiction which leads the critic most readily into the problems and meanings of the story.
- Symbol:** related to imagery. It is something which is itself yet stands for or means something else. It tends to be more singular, a bit more fixed than imagery. For example, in Lessing's "A Woman on a Roof," the brief red sun suit seems to symbolize the woman's freedom and independence from externally imposed standards of behavior.
- Tone:** suggests an attitude toward the subject which is communicated by the words the author chooses. Part of the range of tone includes playful, sombre, serious, casual, formal, ironic. Tone is important because it designates the mood and effect of a work.