The first thing to note about this assignment is the due date. You may turn in your paper as early as our second class meeting—an outrageously bad idea, indeed—but no later than November 30.

The term paper is to be a research paper, between 2500–3000 words (double for graduate students), that defends a thesis of your own devising on any literary subject that fits within the context of the material studied this semester, Middle English literature. The subject for the essay must be some arguable point you have noticed, not simply, for instance, a statement that medieval literature frequently uses a religion as a theme. (Who would say that the literature does not?) You should find a subject, therefore, that will lend itself to exposition at some length, and you should devise a thesis that will result in a clear, coherent argument. The essay may be longer than 3000 words (6000 graduate) if the material warrants it, but extended length, in itself, does not guarantee a higher grade. The physical document must be a legible (i.e., dark enough and not smudged) print copy, and the essay needs to have a title (in a normal 12-point font) that is not boldfaced, italicized, or underlined.

By November 16 (two weeks prior to the paper’s due date), each undergraduate student must turn in a typewritten one-page paper prospectus, comprising a working title, a fully articulated thesis, and a tentative abstract/outline. All prospectuses—not just topics—must be submitted to me and must be approved by me before you begin to write your paper. (If you want to change your thesis, you must provide written justification and get permission.) Papers on theses that have not had prior approval will NOT be accepted. The point of this mandatory monitoring is to save you from attempting a thesis that is indefensible or incorrect. Still, do not be afraid to be original in your thinking! When I say “incorrect,” I mean in terms of a thesis that would argue, say, that Milton influenced the Pearl-Poet, which is chronologically impossible. But if you want to contend that the Pearl-Poet was influenced by the Bhagavad-gita, which I think certainly untrue, I would be more than happy to read a paper in which you discuss the theological instruction Pearl gives the dreamer and parallels it with the tutelage Krishna offers Arjuna. At any rate, do be original: saying the Pearl-Poet writes about Christian theology is not a new insight, but rather, a restatement of the theme of Pearl.

You must cite sources for all information that you have not discovered through your own original research. (Reading someone else’s research is not original research.) However, facts that have become common knowledge can be used without citation. Thus, for example, you would not need to cite the fact that the Pearl-Poet wrote in the Northwest Midland dialect, but you would need to cite a source for an argument that, in part, claims the author might have been John de Mascy of Sale, who lived in the locale of the poem’s composition at the right time. (One is a readily available public fact; the other is something for which you are clearly indebted to William Vantuono’s original research.) And incidentally, biographical information is given only when it
is needed to make some point in defense of your thesis. (You may not need to cite any biographical material at all.)

Check in the MLA Bibliography and in other bibliographies available through the library for relevant articles and books. Your Works Cited page should contain at least eight items of secondary material in addition to *The Riverside Chaucer*, at least five of which are printed material—i.e., articles or books. (As far as EBSCOHost is concerned, you can use “print” sources found there as long as the electronic resource is a real source, a piece of literary scholarship—i.e., not an encyclopedia entry or a plot summary.) I encourage you to begin working on your research as early as possible in case you need to make use of interlibrary borrowing. Read the secondary material after you have read the primary material and after you have made your own discoveries within the text. Remember, because a source on your Works Cited page is only valid if you use it in your paper, you cannot simply expand your list of references and expect such padding to count as having the proper number of sources. Any paper with too few acceptable sources or with unused sources will lose a letter grade.

In citing sources, follow the form given in the *MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers*, 7th ed., available in bookstores. (Graduate students, you should consider eventually getting—if you do not already own one—an *MLA Style Manual and Guide to Scholarly Publishing*, 3rd ed., the standard for professionals and graduate students, which differs somewhat from the *MLA Handbook*.) And remember, MLA style is not simply about citations, so follow the overall formatting guidelines. For instance, you should not use a cover sheet, folder, or plastic cover. I do require, however, that you use a staple in the upper left-hand corner instead of a paper clip, (Take heed that I refuse to accept unstapled papers; because papers are due in class and I do not habitually carry a stapler, I recommend that you bring your paper already stapled.) If you are not using the printed handbook/manual itself, make sure that you verify either that the Web site you consult is both up to date and correct or that the formatting software is accurate. Proper formatting is part of the assignment’s requirements, and an incorrectly formatted paper will be assigned a grade one letter grade lower than it otherwise would have received.

Along with your paper, you must turn in a separate research packet. Each item on your Works Cited page must be represented. For each print source, include a photocopy of either the first page for an article or the title page for a book. If you must use an internet source for researching your paper, append for each online bibliographic entry an annotation in which you explain whose Web site you are using and how you know it is a relevant, authoritative, and accurate source of information. For instance, Wikipedia is notoriously unreliable and should not be used for academic applications, but were you to use it as a source, you would need to justify not only your use of an encyclopedia—essentially, a collection of factual common knowledge—but also your choice (beyond ease of access) of that particular encyclopedia. Failure to turn in this packet means the assignment was not done completely, and the assignment grade will be lowered three letter grades.

Your essay will be graded on the originality and insightfulness of the idea and on its content, of course, but also on the strength of its organization, the effectiveness of its expression, and the agreement of its usage and mechanics with standard norms. Therefore, you should produce an
essay that is perceptive and persuasive, is presented in a coherent manner, is clearly written, and is in adherence with all the other expectations of formal academic prose.

I will not proofread your essays. If you wish to discuss an idea, please feel free to come to my office so that we can critically appraise the viability of your proposed line of thinking. On the other hand, if you want help organizing your essay or need aid with some of the finer points of grammar, mechanics, punctuation, diction, spelling, and style, make an appointment to visit the Writing Center, located in H. L. Griffin 107. There you will find trained consultants who will assist you in the writing process. Do not expect them to “fix” your papers for you, but rather, go to the Writing Center with a draft, prepared to engage in the process of improving your writing. Due to the frequently large patronage of the small Writing Center, make an appointment. Go early enough to allow yourself time to revise your papers. Additionally, the STEP lab in HLG 108 has computers on which you can write your paper, but you are responsible for bringing an appropriate form of portable data storage on which to save the file.
Mimi:

I tell the students that I am not nearly as stupid as I look and that I consider plagiarism not only a matter of academic dishonesty, but also a personal insult, and that they insult me at their peril. Nonetheless some fools try, and they end up weeping in my office and blowing their noses in the necks of their t-shirts and begging for mercy. But of course I am all about justice and not a bit about mercy. All the devils in hell will go iceskating before I show leniency to a cheater.