

ESSAY TOPIC I:
Compare Two Translations of *Beowulf*

Compare how two different translators have rendered one of the following passages from *Beowulf*:

- Beowulf sails to Denmark (194–224)
- Beowulf fights Grendel (790–818)
- Beowulf fights Grendel’s Mother (1537–69)
- Beowulf and Wiglaf kill the dragon (2672–2708)

You can pick two from among the following translators:

- E. Talbot Donaldson
- Seamus Heaney
- John McNamara
- Edward L. Ridsen
- Alan Sullivan and Timothy Murphy
- J. R. R. Tolkien

The relevant passages from all these translations are available for [download](#).

Whichever two translations you pick, your assignment is to look for differences in word choice, syntax, and poetic form between them and explain how these differences affect the meaning, tone, and style of the passage. Reproduce both translations of the passage early in your essay and refer to them frequently throughout your analysis.

Begin your paper with a genuine question about how the translations differ. Make that question the last sentence of your first paragraph. The rest of the essay should answer this question. Present your analysis in a clear and well-organized manner. Each paragraph should deal with a specific element of the translations, explain how that element works, and present its main point in a clear topic sentence. Draw your conclusions in your final paragraph, briefly summing up your answers to the question posed at the start of the essay. (See the [Sample Essay](#) for a model of this format.)

Read both translations of the passage slowly, carefully, and repeatedly in order to make worthwhile observations on them. Your assignment is to analyze the translations themselves, not Anglo-Saxon culture, or the Mythic Hero’s Journey, or the Meaning of Life. And don’t get bogged down in plot summary or paraphrase or other abstractions. Make everything you say in your analysis relate directly to the actual words of the text. Don’t get sidetracked; stick with the words. The more specific you are, the stronger your analysis will be.

Make your prose as clear and concise as possible. Don't waste your time (or mine) trying to sound impressive. Write, instead, in a conversational voice: the clear, plainspoken, engaging voice of a person talking about a subject they find interesting. Don't let your essay run longer than what you have to say. One sentence that actually says something is better than a paragraph that doesn't. Make every word count.

In evaluating your essay, I will focus on the intelligence and specificity of your ideas, the precision of your analysis, the clarity of your prose, and the originality and persuasiveness of your thesis.

Your essay should be between 500–800 words — not counting the two translations you quote at the start of the paper. Use MLA Format for quotations and citations.

You can see a sample Works Cited page below. (See also drmarkwomack.com/mla-style/: “Document Format,” “Anatomy of a Citation,” “How to Quote Verse,” and “Documenting Sources.”)

Submit your essay through the TurnItIn link on the class Blackboard page labeled “Beowulf Essay – Fall 20”

DUE DATES:

- **COMMENTS DEADLINE: September 11**
If you want my comments on your essay, you must submit it on or before Friday, September 11.

(Please Note: You will NOT be able to revise and then re-submit your paper after seeing my comments.)
- **FINAL DEADLINE: September 21**
Although I will make few or no comments on essays submitted after Friday, September 11, I will grade these papers just the same as those turned in by the earlier date.

Works Cited

- Donaldson, E. Talbot, translator. *Beowulf: A New Translation*. W. W. Norton, 1966.
- Heaney, Seamus, translator. *Beowulf*. *Norton Anthology of English Literature*, edited by Stephen Greenblatt, et al., 9th ed., Vol 1., W. W. Norton, 2012, pp. 41–108.
- McNamara, John, translator. *Beowulf: A New Translation with an Introduction and Notes*, Barnes & Noble, 2005.
- Risden, Edward L., translator. *Beowulf: A Verse Translation for Students*. Kindle edition, Witan, 2012.
- Sullivan, Allan, and Timothy Murphy, translators. *Beowulf*. Edited by Sarah Anderson, Pearson, 2004.
- Tolkien, J.R.R., translator. *Beowulf: A Translation and Commentary together with Sellic Spell*. Edited by Christopher Tolkien, Houghton & Mifflin, 2014.

You will, of course, only have the two translations you cite in your essay on your Works Cited page.

When you quote from these works in your essay, use the translator's last name and the verse line numbers in your parenthetical reference:

The prose translations begins: “Lo! the glory of the people of the Spear-Danes in days of old we have heard tell, how those princes did deeds of valour” (Tolkien 13). But Sullivan and Murphy's alliterative verse translation starts like this:

So! The Spear Danes in days of old
were led by a lord famed for his forays.
We heard of that prince's power and prowess. (1–3)

*Note that because I include the second translator's name in my sentence, I did not repeat it in the parenthetical reference.