



Analyzing Literature: Critical Analysis

As critical readers, we need to read closely and engage deeply with the ideas presented in literary sources. As critical writers, we need to show our readers how we have analyzed literature as clearly as possible. A critical essay is a common assignment used to engage with texts and sources in this manner. They follow a format surrounding explicating specific sections of the text to prove a claim that arises from reading. This handout will help you understand the purpose and style of critical analysis of literature in the form of the critical essay.

The Purpose of Analyzing Literature

Analyzing literature at first glance seems like an isolated type of writing, leaving you wondering why these classes are required for many fields. Writing critical essays has three purposes:

Understanding:

Critical analysis demonstrates your mastery of an important skill: the ability to read literature insightfully and gather your own understanding of the work.

Communication:

Critical analysis allows you to demonstrate your ability to clearly state and explain your ideas through writing.

Critical thinking:

Engaging in critical analysis helps you to improve your ability to read deeply and write clearly. All writing is a process of discovery and constant improvement. Writing about literature forces one to look closely at a work and think deeply about it, providing an understanding of how literature functions— an understanding which may not be obtained from merely reading.

Elements of a Critical Essay

Accuracy:

You must be sure that you understand the basic, literal meaning of the text. Check all your references to the text (whether in the form of quotations or paraphrases) to make sure that you have not misread it or read into things that you would like to believe are there.

Consistency:

Your reading must not contradict itself, either directly or by implication.

Plausibility:

This feature is one of the hardest to self-assess, since ideas always seem plausible to their inventors, but it is also the most important. It is easy to produce a reading that explains a few carefully chosen aspects of the text, but it must not be contradicted by other aspects of the text. For example, if you develop an argument that a work shows the hazards of ambition, but the work contains a character who seems to be rewarded for ambition, you must explain the contradiction or modify your theory. It is this plausibility that separates a strong interpretation (which may or may not be believed by everyone) from a bad one, which will convince nobody but its inventor.

Support from the text:

This is an important feature to strengthen plausibility. Back up statements by citing or quoting specific parts of the text.

Example: if you say that two characters are foils of each other, explain what in the story makes you feel that way and support your analysis with examples.

Explication of text:

Just as general statements should be backed up by specific references to the text, all references to the text should be accompanied by explanations of their significance and the impact these have on the understanding of the text. Often these explanations are more effective after (rather than before) the text reference or quotation, as this provides readers context to ground the analysis and interpretation.

Effective use of quotations:

One of the best ways to use a quotation is to use it to illustrate a general statement.

Example:

Charlie blames his moral collapse of three years ago on the times by saying "I worked hard for ten years, you know--until I got luck on the market, like so many people" (p.329).

Note: Never drop in quotations without indicating their significance. Failing to link quotations to ideas will make the reader wonder why you have included the quote.

Scope:

Ask yourself: is the focus of my project broad or narrow? This will influence your analysis and use of evidence.

Some essays are broad in scope, focusing on the work as a whole. An essay that claims to be a general discussion of a work should pay attention to major themes and central incidents. Avoid building an entire argument around a minor aspect of the work unless you can show how it sheds light overall.

Conversely, some essays are very narrow in their scope. An essay can focus deliberately on one aspect of a work. For instance, entire essays have been written on the significance of Marlow's posture in Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*.

Depending on the requirements of your assignments, either broad or narrow scopes may be appropriate. But, in either case, it is important to be aware of the scope of your project and to make sure that your discussion matches the scope.

Organization

Of course, all writing should be clear and correct. The writing should flow smoothly both on the page and when read aloud to help the reader understand. Be particularly careful of quotation format (see any good writing handbook for details). When referring to a literary work of any form, follow the convention of describing all events in the present tense.

Structure of a Critical Essay

The most obvious structure for a critical essay is a "support" structure where you state your claim about the text and then prove it through quotations and explication. This structure often works, but it may have disadvantages:

Oversimplification:

An attempt to boil a work down to a one-sentence claim may (depending on the work) be too limiting. Many layered and complex texts cannot be limited to a single understanding.

Repetitiveness:

Like any support structure, this structure may leave you with no way to conclude except by repeating your opening.

Guidance for structure

If you are having trouble structuring a critical essay, here is a format that may be helpful:

Opening Discussion

Open with a discussion of the general area (or themes) that the author explores. Keep themes as general as possible (e.g. ambition, gender, stereotyping, the American dream, etc.). Point out how these themes fits with the basic plot of the work. Your assignment may help you do some of this work. For example, if you are asked to "discuss the theme of evil in *Light in August*," your general direction is assigned. This may help to turn your topic into a how or why question to help you form a thesis statement.

Close Reading

Do a close reading to show how this theme arises in the work. Go systematically through the work (usually, but not necessarily, in the order written) and highlight specific incidents, images,

and statements that seem important. Explain the significance of examples through explication. Paraphrase and quote only enough to ensure that your reader knows what you focus on.

Synthesis

Conclude by pointing out, either briefly or in detail, how some of these specific points tie together into a more specific theme, group of themes, or even a specific "message." You will be in a better position to tell the reader something informative after they have seen how you interpret the work.

Hint: If you aren't sure what you think a work is about, try doing the close reading first. You may discover significance as you go along but be prepared to do quite a bit of rewriting when uncertain about which direction to take.

Titles

Try to find a specific title that tells your reader what you have found significant in the work. If you can't find a specific title, it may indicate that your essay is not very specific. For example, "The Theme of Evil in *Light in August*" tells the reader more about the focus of your essays than, "An Essay on *Heart of Darkness*."

Finding significance

When trying to decide what is significant in a literary text, some of the following may provide clues:

Repetition:

Repeated images, actions, symbols and motifs, incidents, or character sayings within a work often indicate significance.

Philosophical statements within the text

Look for philosophical statements from the author or characters (which may or may not echo the sentiments of the author).

Note: Ideas expressed by characters and outcomes of events in the text may not always be in alignment with the author's own beliefs or intended messages. It is best to refer to the characters as their own person, rather than assuming they are an avatar for the author's views.

Imagery

Look for images that may have universal symbolic value (darkness and light, the earth, religious images, etc.) Check your interpretation against the rest of the text to see if it's prominent. Be prepared for abstract symbolism. Does darkness suggest evil, death, the womb (i.e., safety), ignorance? Perhaps all or none of the above?

Additional guidance

Don't worry if you are unsure regarding the significance of every image, idea, or event. Label educated guesses as such (if you have some reason for what you say) and don't be ashamed of them. Be guided by this general rule: the interpretation that is most likely plausible is the one that fits best with the rest of the text.

Using Sources

In literary criticism, the work that you are directly analyzing is called the primary source, and any other books or articles about that work are called secondary sources. You should use the primary source as the basis for your analysis, and you should start by focusing on your own interpretation of the work. You can use secondary sources books to ground and support your ideas through reference to scholarly discourse around the work. Occasionally, feel overwhelmed or confused by the competing ideas and interpretations of scholars. Remember: your own ideas and explication are the most important part of the paper. The ideas expressed in secondary scholarship can be used to support your own ideas, but should never be used to replace your unique interpretation.

Documenting secondary source use

If you use secondary sources in your analysis, you must document not only quotations from those sources, but also any ideas you get from them. Failure to do so constitutes plagiarism, which is a serious academic offence.

Signal phrases

If you do borrow an idea from a source, one way to integrate it is using a signal phrase. A signal phrase is an expression that clearly indicates the source of an idea. One example of a signal phrase is the formula "x says that...".

Example:

Baldwin says that pilgrimage in *The Canterbury Tales* is symbolic of Man's pilgrimage to Heaven (15). I do not believe it is accidental that this pilgrimage is led by the noble knight.

In this example the author reference's Baldwin's original idea and expands on it with their own ideas (in this case by discussing how the Knight fits the symbolic pattern suggested by Baldwin). Using the signal phrase allows the author to make it clear to the reader which ideas come from Baldwin, and which are their own.

Citation

When using signal phrases whether you are quoting or paraphrasing a secondary source, you must include citation information that is appropriate to the required citation style.

The example above is written in MLA style (the most common style for the academic discipline of English). In the example "(15)" refers to the page number from Baldwin's work. MLA does not typically require you to include the publication year of the source when using a signal phrase, but other styles might. Require different information. For instance, APA Style requires you to include the publication year of the source but not the page number (except in the case of direct quotation). So, the same excerpt in APA style would look like this:

Example:

Baldwin (1955) says that pilgrimage in *The Canterbury Tales* is symbolic of Man's pilgrimage to Heaven. I do not believe it is accidental that this pilgrimage is led by the noble knight.

When formatting your citation, be sure that you have a good understanding of the citation style requirements for the assignment.

Bibliographic entries

Regardless of your citation style, make sure that for each work you cite in the body of the paper you provide a full reference for that work. This provides readers the information they need to find the works you have cited. In most citation styles this is accomplished through a "References," "Bibliography," or "Works Cited" list at the end of your paper