

Critical Essay

The word "critical" has positive as well as negative meanings. You can write a critical essay that agrees entirely with the reading. The word "critical" describes your attitude when you read the article. This attitude is best described as "detached evaluation," meaning that you weigh the coherence of the reading, the completeness of its data, and so on, before you accept or reject it.

A critical essay or review begins with an analysis or exposition of the reading, article-by-article, book by book. Each analysis should include the following points:

1. A summary of the author's point of view, including a brief statement of the author's main idea (i.e., thesis or theme). An outline of the important "facts" and lines of reasoning the author used to support the main idea. A summary of the author's explicit or implied values. A presentation of the author's conclusion or suggestions for action
2. An evaluation of the author's work, including an assessment of the "facts" presented on the basis of correctness, relevance, and whether or not pertinent facts were omitted. An evaluation or judgment of the logical consistency of the author's argument. An appraisal of the author's values in terms of how you feel or by an accepted standard.

Once the analysis is completed, check your work! Ask yourself, "Have I read all the relevant (or assigned) material?" "Do I have complete citations?" If not, complete the work! The following steps are how this is done.

Now you can start to write the first draft of your expository essay/literature review. Outline the conflicting arguments, if any; this will be part of the body of your expository essay/literature review. Ask yourself, "Are there other possible positions on this matter?" If so, briefly outline them. Decide on your own position (it may agree with one of the competing arguments) and state explicitly the reason(s) why you hold that position by outlining the consistent facts and showing the relative insignificance of contrary facts. Coherently state your position by integrating your evaluations of the works you read. This becomes your conclusions section.

Briefly state your position, state why the problem you are working on is important, and indicate the important questions that need to be answered; this is your "Introduction." Push quickly through this draft--don't worry about spelling, don't search for exactly the right word, don't hassle yourself with grammar, don't worry overmuch about sequence--that's why this is called a "rough draft." Deal with these during your revisions. The point of a rough draft is to get your ideas on paper. Once they are there, you can deal with the superficial (though very important) problems.

Consider this while writing:

- The critical essay is informative; it emphasizes the literary work being studied rather than the feelings and opinions of the person writing about the literary work; in this kind of writing, all claims made about the work need to be backed up with evidence.

- The difference between feelings and facts is simple--it does not matter what you believe about a book or play or poem; what matters is what you can prove about it, drawing upon evidence found in the text itself, in biographies of the author, in critical discussions of the literary work, etc.
- Criticism does not mean you have to attack the work or the author; it simply means you are thinking critically about it, exploring it and discussing your findings.
- In many cases, you are teaching your audience something new about the text.
- The literary essay usually employs a serious and objective tone. (Sometimes, depending on your audience, it is all right to use a lighter or even humorous tone, but this is not usually the case).
- Use a "claims and evidence" approach. Be specific about the points you are making about the novel, play, poem, or essay you are discussing and back up those points with evidence that your audience will find credible and appropriate. If you want to say, "The War of the Worlds is a novel about how men and women react in the face of annihilation, and most of them do not behave in a particularly courageous or noble manner," say it, and then find evidence that supports your claim.
- Using evidence from the text itself is often your best option. If you want to argue, "isolation drives Frankenstein's creature to become evil," back it up with events and speeches from the novel itself.
- Another form of evidence you can rely on is criticism, what other writers have claimed about the work of literature you are examining. You may treat these critics as "expert witnesses," whose ideas provide support for claims you are making about the book. In most cases, you should not simply provide a summary of what critics have said about the literary work.
- In fact, one starting point might be to look at what a critic has said about one book or poem or story and then a) ask if the same thing is true of another book or poem or story and 2) ask what it means that it is or is not true.
- Do not try to do everything. Try to do one thing well. And beware of subjects that are too broad; focus your discussion on a particular aspect of a work rather than trying to say everything that could possibly be said about it.
- Be sure your discussion is well organized. Each section should support the main idea. Each section should logically follow and lead into the sections that come before it and after it. Within each paragraph, sentences should be logically connected to one another.
- Remember that in most cases you want to keep your tone serious and objective.
- Be sure your essay is free of mechanical and stylistic errors.
- If you quote or summarize (and you will probably have to do this) be sure you follow an appropriate format (MLA format is the most common one when examining literature) and be sure you provide a properly formatted list of works cited at the end of your essay

