

Critical Analysis

Critical Analysis

Things To Consider

The Critical Analysis Essay: All of our essays so far have involved some amount of critical analysis - essentially, looking very closely at the text and exploring the significance of all of its elements. What were the tiny symbolic details in "Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?" that suggest the story may be read as a fairy tale? What was the key passage of "Loneliness" that reveals Enoch Robinson's true nature? Answering these questions is a process of critical analysis.

But the entire essay is critical analysis - for example, when the assignment is "Critically examine gender relations in..." - your approach to the assignment needs to be a little different. The "Prewriting" step of the writing process becomes very important. Re-read the story you are working on, and read it carefully. Look for every little detail that tells you something about gender roles & relations. Take notes, gloss and highlight - these are the details you'll want to use in your paper.

From this close reading, you'll come to some conclusions about gender relations in the story. Your essay's thesis should be based on these conclusions. Your thesis should be an expression of how you see gender relations represented in the story. Then, in your essay, use your critical analysis of the text to prove your point. Back up your argument with the details you noted in the text (yes, this means use quotes). Remember, for this essay, you need to work very closely with the text - this is as closely as you will work with the text in this class.

First-Person Versus Third-Person: You all did commendable jobs writing your Essay #2's without any "I." So, I'm sure that you all noticed that an essay written in the third person has a much different tone than one written in the first person. A third person essay does not call attention to the presence of the writer - the ideas contained in the essay stand on their own. This makes the essay seem more factual, more convincing.

When you write in the first person, especially when you use phrases like "I think..." or "I believe..." you run the risk of labelling your ideas as opinions, not facts. Even when you provide direct, specific examples to prove your point, your idea may come across as an interpretation. This can really hamper the tone of a critical analysis essay, where the paper is supposed to be based very solidly on the text, not on your opinions. So, before you start to draft this essay, think about the effect your choice of "person" will have on the finished product.

Critical Analysis

CRITICAL ANALYSIS

Critical - characterized by careful analysis and judgment
Analysis - a separating or breaking up of any whole into its parts, with an examination of their nature, proportion, function, interrelationship, etc.

Well, here we are at Essay #3 already. With this assignment, we will focus directly on critical analysis, a concept that we have been talking about all semester. By this point, I'm sure that you all have a good sense of what critical analysis is - after all, you have all practiced carefully examining a text in the last two essays. What is different about this assignment is that here, critical analysis will be the central focus of the essay.

Without further ado, then, here is the assignment:

Write a 500-word essay critically analyzing gender relations in one of the following stories:

- "Hills Like White Elephants" (613-617)
- "The Yellow Wallpaper" (662-676)
- "The Chase" (681-686)

Do you see how this "essay question" differs from the questions in the first two assignments? Here, it's not really a "question" at all - it is just a topic for you to analyze, to take apart and study very closely.

Whichever story you choose, there is a lot to examine. Each of these three stories is a complex representation of gender relations. In each, the most obvious part of that representation is the relationship between the "main couple" - the man and the girl in "Hills," the narrator and her husband in "Wallpaper," and the narrator and his wife in "Chase." But in each story, there are other important factors beyond (or beneath?) that main relationship. For example, consider the operation in "Hills," the narrator's illness (or the wallpaper of the title) in "Wallpaper," or the hunting metaphor in "Chase." Also, in each story the setting (time, place, culture) has a great deal to do with gender roles.

As you start the Prewriting process, you need to consider all of the factors that create a representation of gender relations. Look closely at the text and take it apart into its elements, and study the way the elements of the story interact to create the whole. Your thesis should emerge from this careful analysis, and it should be a statement on the nature of gender relations in the story. Then, in your essay, show precisely how the story creates that representation.

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Critical Analysis in General We spent most of our class time last week working on critical analysis, and by now you have all read the article "Drug Abuse, Race Relations, and the Prime Time News Program" (Common Culture, pp 453-467). So you should all have a pretty good understanding of what it's all about. But to review the basic concept again: Critical Analysis involves examining a "text" (in this case, a cultural artifact) very closely, recognizing and interpreting the various aspects/elements of that text, and from this close study arriving at an interpretation of the text as a whole. So, say your topic is the OJ Simpson trial. You would carefully examine the trial, scrutinize the various elements of the trial, such as Johnnie Cochran and the race card or the overwhelming presence of the media, and come to an overall interpretation of the trial as a "text."

The Critical Analysis Thesis As always, your paper will center around a thesis. In this case, your thesis should be based on your interpretation of the "text." What does your "text" express about America and American culture? In essence, your answer to this question will be your thesis. You arrive at your thesis through close, careful critical analysis, and you will support it in your paper by detailing that analysis, and showing how specific aspects of your "text" support your argument.

"Technical Stuff" This is our last take-home essay, so here is one last round of "pointers" and reminders about essay writing:

- Sentence structure and punctuation: Remember, your use of punctuation in effect determines sentence structure. A lot of you are still putting commas in the wrong places. Also, I'm still seeing sentence fragments. Make sure that your sentences are complete and independent, and that you do not break up parts of the sentence with unnecessary commas. When in doubt, refer to your Handbook.
- Paragraph structure: Your paragraphs must be unified and focused, which means that each paragraph should fully express one idea, and remain focused on that one idea. Some of you are still writing paragraphs that ramble and try to cover far more than one paragraph can really cover. This is a major mistake. If you can't see a unifying focus for a paragraph, then it probably needs to be restructured, and possibly broken down into more than one.
- Formality of tone: Like the last three essays, this is a formal academic essay. As such, the tone of your paper must be appropriate, i.e., formal. This means no use of cliches, no slang, no informal expressions. And once again, no contractions, please.

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CRITICAL ANALYSIS

Critical - characterized by careful analysis and judgment
Analysis - a separating of a whole into its parts and an examination of these parts to find out their nature, proportion, function, interrelationship, etc.

Now we have reached the final take-home essay of the semester, the critical analysis essay. In many ways, critical analysis is at the heart of college writing. The point of this assignment will be to critically examine a cultural text, determine what that text has to say about America and American culture, and write an essay that shows precisely how specific elements of the text express that point about America and American culture.

Pretty simple. This leaves only two questions - What is a cultural text? And what does it mean to critically examine that text?

As a matter of fact, we have been working on cultural texts for the entire semester. From the "compare and contrast" assignment, you know that "text" can have a pretty broad definition. So what I mean by cultural text is a cultural artifact, just like you have been writing about in your journals all along.

As far as critical examining goes, from the very start of the semester I have talked about "critical thinking." In fact, all of you have been practicing critical thinking in every single assignment we have done. Well, critical thinking and critical examining are essentially the same process. You will study your text closely, arrive at a thesis about what the text says about America, and carefully support that thesis with specific references to your text.

So, here is the assignment:

Select one cultural artifact (ideally, but not necessarily, from your journal) that lends itself to critical analysis. Examine it very closely and determine what the artifact says about America and American culture. Develop a thesis that explains what that message is and how your artifact expresses it. Then write an approximately 500 word essay critically analyzing your artifact (text). Explain what the text expresses and how it expresses it, using specific examples from that text.

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PATTERN OF A CRITICAL ANALYSIS

Introduction: Statement of
Thesis

"One message/theme of the
work is..."

Paragraph 2-4: Examination of
Message

Points 1-3 plus examples

Conclusion: Summary of Points
Message of the Work

PATTERN OF A CRITICAL REVIEW

Introduction: Statement of
Thesis

"This work is effective or
not effective because..."

Paragraph 2: Summary of plot/
contents/characters

Paragraph 3: Analysis of message/
elements that built message

Paragraph 4: Judgement of effec-
tiveness-- Strengths

Paragraph 5: Judgement of effec-
tiveness-- Weaknesses

Conclusion: overall worth