

Writing a Critical Essay about Literature

(AKA: *Your professor told you to stop summarizing and start analyzing*)

So you have been given an assignment to write an essay about a piece of literature. This assignment may have been called a "critical literature essay," an "analysis," a "critical analysis" or by one of many other frustrating terms. The most important thing to remember is that you **will not summarize** what has happened in a literary work **but analyze** it. You will write "critically." For the purpose of this handout, we will pretend that you must write a critical analysis of the Wizard of Oz. (Yes, it was a book before it was a movie!)

The idea behind **critical analysis** of literature is to write an essay that explains **how a work demonstrates its themes**.

So what exactly is critical writing?

To write **critically** means to actually think about what a piece of literature means and find a way to express what it says to you. You must "consider" the work, form opinions about what you have read, and think about how the ideas in the work connect to the world in a larger way.

In your paper, you will most likely discuss how certain literary techniques are used to convey specific ideas. You will not rate how good or bad an author is. You will discuss *what a piece means* and *how it achieves its effect*. To write critically, you must provide analysis of specific points. You will explain how the events (quotes, actions, speech, examples, etc.) demonstrate themes and ideas. In the following paragraph, the essay writer explains what the ruby slippers represent in an example of **critical analysis**:

"The red ruby slippers represent Dorothy's untapped power. She wears the shoes throughout the entire story, never understanding that she could have used them all along to go home. The Good Witch, Glinda, points out what Dorothy hasn't realized when she says, "You've had the power all along." Dorothy, like her friends the Scarecrow, the Tinman, and the Lion, was always able to solve her own problems but never looked inside herself to do it. When she taps her feet together, she takes control and uses her own resources."

Notice that in this **analysis**, the author uses examples and quotes to support his point. (That the ruby slippers represent Dorothy's untapped power.) The author does not just present quotes separately; he works them smoothly into grammatical sentences that show how they function in the story. The essay writer also uses dependent clauses: "When she taps her feet together. . . . (plus your opinion of what this action means)" to show what ideas a specific example from the story demonstrates. He doesn't just tell what happens. He uses a topic sentence to clearly explain that the paragraph will *discuss* the meaning of the slippers.

To "**summarize**" is to restate the main points and events in a condensed way.

Example of **summary**: "Dorothy is a farm-girl from Kansas. Dorothy is unhappy in Kansas, and when a tornado comes along, her house gets sucked up into it and she ends up in a magical land called "Oz.". Her house lands on a witch, killing her and causing everyone to think she is a witch, too. When she wakes up the first day in Oz, a good Witch approaches her and gives her a pair of ruby slippers. Then she sets off on a yellow brick road to find the Wizard...."

But what's wrong with summarizing?

You **can't** write like this, because this it only tells what happens in the story. Although you will have to **discuss** the actions/plot of the story, **you will not merely restate** what happens.

Approaching the assignment

Here we go. You have to start somewhere. Don't go into this blindly.

1. Make sure that you have **thoroughly read over the handout** for the specific assignment. Take notes on it; circle/underline what you know must be included in the essay, and ask your professor to explain anything you are unclear about. (The suggestions on this handout are meant to be general supplements to what your professor has asked you to do. If anything directly conflicts, follow the instructions of your professor.)

2. **Review** any **literary terms** mentioned in the essay assignment. Read up on the terms wherever they occurred in your textbook or check the glossary.

3. **Read the piece** of literature **more than once** (if it is a novel or long play, you should at least re-read the sections you feel will be important to your paper.) Take notes in the margins. (News flash... if you sell your book back, it will bring a "used" price whether or not you write in it.) Ask questions. Flag pages or passages that relate to your topic and/or that interest you.

4. If you have a choice, **choose a literary work that you** feel you generally **understood**. You should have a good grasp of what the themes are. The **themes** are the major ideas expressed by the work. When someone asks you, "What was the book about?" You might be tempted to say "A farm-girl named Dorothy." However, that can't be a theme; it's not an idea. Themes are like lessons or values. So, you might say the theme is, "Finding your own power," or "There's no place like home." Those are themes that can be worked with. Maybe you think the theme is friendship or cooperation. That's ok. There are many themes to any one work. Your job is to pick one and explain how it is presented.

5. Try to **choose one aspect** of the work **to focus on**. If you professor has assigned a topic such as "Discuss Dorothy's character development in the Wizard of Oz," or "Analyze how the ruby slippers function as a symbol," then you will simply start-there and figure out what you personally think the text is saying about those issues. But if you have been given no specific *topic*, you will have to narrow your thoughts down to one area.

Beginning the writing process

Ok. Now you are ready to write. You can start with a specific thesis like "The ruby slippers represent Dorothy's untapped power" or a general idea like "Dorothy needs to be more confident," or just a topic such as "the ruby slippers." You do not have to know exactly what you are going to say when you start writing. Be prepared to revise and reorganize. Face facts: you're not going to be able to just write this in one draft on the computer.

If you have trouble getting started or finding enough to say, you can do all, any, or none of the following:

1. **Outlining:** You can write an outline and plan what topics you want to cover to prove a specific point. This is more easily done if you have taken lots of notes in your book as you read the piece. You might write down topic sentences for each paragraph and list possible examples.

2. **Freewriting:** You can just start freewriting on the topic given by the professor, or, if no topic was given, on whatever interested you. As you write, don't censor yourself. Just get out your ideas in rough sentences. Ask questions. Complain. Make connections. It's ok to write "Why didn't Dorothy ever stop whining?" or "That stupid dog annoyed me," or "The wizard was a total fraud just like all politicians." When you are done freewriting, look for all the spots where you had a strong opinion. The best ideas will come from your strongest opinions. Now what you have to do is prove your point by finding examples and support in the text.

3. **Clustering:** You can write down all sorts of ideas, phrases and examples on a piece of paper and then use circles or arrows to figure out how they connect. Often clustering leads to an outline. The Writing Center has handouts on clustering.

4. **Starting without an intro:** If you are stuck for a specific thesis or intro, but have some ideas to write about, don't agonize over the intro. You can figure that out later after you see where your ideas have led you. As you write the paper, your opinions may change somewhat. That's ok. Just make sure, when you are done, that all the points you made relate to your thesis; change your thesis and revise your introduction if you have to.

Things you might not know about writing a critical English paper

1. It should be in **MLA format**. Find a handbook, use a library handout, or review a sample paper to find out what MLA format is. An infinite number of monkeys typing out an infinite number of essays might randomly hit upon MLA in ten thousand years. You won't. So:

-Use Times New Roman font, 12 point, and double-space throughout.

—After each quote, put the page number in parenthesis. For novels and short stories, use page numbers. For poetry, use line numbers. For drama, use the act and scene numbers as well as line numbers. If the poem or play doesn't provide these things, use page numbers instead.

—Use the correct heading: Your name, the professor's name, the course, and the date in the upper left hand corner.

2. It should be written in the **present tense**. Yes, really. Most likely the book or story was originally in the past tense. That's not important. Write your essay as if the piece of literature and its characters have always existed and will exist forever. Ex: "When Dorothy taps her shoes together, it shows that..."

3. **It should not go in chronological order**. That means that your paper should not move in order through the literature. The reason for this is A: this will cause you to fall into summary. B: You are analyzing the work and should organize the paper into logical points and topics. If you are writing about the ruby slippers, you will not start at the beginning, describe how Dorothy acquired them, then move on to where she wears them, and then describe what she does with them in the end. Instead, you will organize by topic. For example you might spend half of the paper discussing what the slippers symbolize to all the munchkins and witches, and then the second half explaining how they come to represent Dorothy's own resources. The only exceptions to this are when you write an explication of a poem; then you go in order line by line.

4. You must **assume that the audience** (your professor or other students) **is familiar with the work**. This is why you will not summarize or tell what happened in the story. Your job is to prove your opinion about *how the author and/or literature present themes*. Assume that the reader already knows **what** happens, but not **why**. You will not tell the reader that a witch attacked Dorothy, but that the witch who attacked Dorothy was a symbol of all Dorothy's fears.

5. **You will not rate** how well or poorly the author has done his/her job. That is the topic of a review. You are writing literary analysis. You will describe **how and why** certain techniques are used. You will analyze the effects of the author's techniques. You will not give your opinion about whether or not it was a good story/poem/play. You can, if you wish, point out things that are inconsistent, effective, confusing, or contradictory, etc. But that is only as a side point to describing/analyzing the ideas presented by the work.

General tips

1. Mention the author, title, general themes, and thesis in your intro statement, but don't use examples in it.
2. Explain how the literary techniques convey ideas, but don't define literary terms in your essay.
3. Work all quotes smoothly into grammatical sentences that explain how and why the quote supports your thesis. Don't begin paragraphs with quotes.
4. Don't discuss the fact that you are writing a paper. Just state your points and prove them.
5. Don't repeat "in the story" over and over. Your professor knows the context already.
6. Use topic sentences in each paragraph. The topic sentence should link the examples in the paragraph to your general thesis/point.
7. Restate and reword your thesis while providing some fresh insight in your conclusion. Don't just restate the intro.
8. Print out your paper and read it slowly before handing it in. Read it out loud if possible.
9. Don't say "I" in the essay, and say "the reader" or "the audience" instead of "you."