The Critical Essay
The Critical Essay

What is it?
How does it differ from other types of essays?
How do we write one?

Let’s look at a kind of critic with whom we might be more familiar: Roger Ebert.
What does a **film critic** do?

- Examines how a director has put together a movie about a particular subject
- Analyzes what works and what doesn’t
- Offers an opinion as to whether or not the movie is successful/valuable/worth seeing
- Critiques **not the topic** of the movie, but **how the director treats that topic**
Critiquing the treatment rather than the topic is an important distinction for writing a critical essay.

What does this mean, exactly?
Topic vs. Treatment

Example: *Twilight*

Topic = Teen vampire romance between Bella and Edward.

Your personal position about the **topic** might be:

*Bella was a fool to marry Edward.* **Or maybe:**

*Vampires are gross and really not all that attractive.*
Topic vs. Treatment

Example: *Twilight*

Topic = Teen vampire romance between Bella and Edward.
Your personal position about the *topic* might be:
*Bella was a fool to marry Edward*. Or maybe:
*Vampires are gross and really not all that attractive.*

But neither addresses how the particular movie’s director *treats the topic.*
Topic vs. Treatment

Example: *Twilight*

Topic = Teen vampire romance between Bella and Edward.

Your personal position about the *topic* might be:
* Bella was a fool to marry Edward. Or maybe: *
* Vampires are gross and really not all that attractive. *

But neither addresses how the particular movie’s director *treats the topic.*

A director could do or say pretty much anything using teen vampires, and even using these particular teen vampires.
Topic vs. Treatment

Example: *Twilight*

Topic = Teen vampire romance between Bella and Edward.

Your personal position about the topic might be:

*Bella was a fool to marry Edward.* Or maybe:

*Vampires are gross and really not all that attractive.*

But neither addresses how the particular movie’s director treats the topic.

A director could do or say pretty much anything using teen vampires, and even using these particular teen vampires.

You need to address: *What does the director of Twilight seem to be doing or saying around teen vampirism?*
For example:

In *Breaking Dawn*, director Bill Condon uses the vampire genre to explore the darker places of the teen female psyche.

Or:

In *Breaking Dawn*, director Bill Condon cheapens the vampire genre with a bloated spectacle of medical horror and soft-core near-porn.
For example:

In *Breaking Dawn*, director Bill Condon uses the vampire genre to explore the darker places of the teen female psyche.

Or:

In *Breaking Dawn*, director Bill Condon cheapens the vampire genre with a bloated spectacle of medical horror and soft-core near-porn.

Both are critiques not of vampirism itself, but of what *Breaking Dawn* does with vampirism.
For example:

In *Breaking Dawn*, director Bill Condon uses the vampire genre to explore the darker places of the teen female psyche.

Or:

In *Breaking Dawn*, director Bill Condon cheapens the vampire genre with a bloated spectacle of medical horror and soft-core near-porn.

Both are critiques not of vampirism itself, but of what *Breaking Dawn* does with vampirism.

Both are possible theses for a critical essay on *Breaking Dawn*.
A Critical Essay is similar

- Instead of watching a movie, we read a text.

- Instead of critiquing the work of the director, we critique the work of the author.
A Critical Essay is similar

• Instead of watching a movie, **we read a text.**

• Instead of critiquing the work of the director, **we critique the work of the author.**

*Remember: Critique **Treatment**, not **Topic.***
Example: Dr. X’s article on genocide

• Our job is **not** to weigh in on the Topic.
  (E.g.: “Genocide is a horrific phenomenon that should be stopped.”)
Example: Dr. X’s article on genocide

• Our job is **not** to weigh in on the Topic.
  (E.g.: “Genocide is a horrific phenomenon that should be stopped.”)
Example: Dr. X’s article on genocide

Our job is to evaluate how the author has treated the Topic.
Example: Dr. X’s article on genocide

Our job is to evaluate how the author has treated the Topic.

E.g.: Dr. X presents a radical but well-supported argument about the long-term social effects of genocide. Or:

Dr. X fails to address several instances of genocide which do not support his argument.
Example: Dr. X’s article on genocide

Our job is to evaluate how the author has treated the Topic.

E.g.: Dr. X presents a radical but well-supported argument about the long-term social effects of genocide. Or:

Dr. X fails to address several instances of genocide which do not support his argument.

Each is an original analysis not of genocide, but of what Dr. X has written about it.
Example: Dr. X’s article on genocide

Our job *is* to evaluate **how the author has treated the Topic**.

*E.g.*: Dr. X presents a **radical but well-supported** argument about the long-term social effects of genocide. *Or:*

Dr. X **fails to address several instances of genocide** which do not support his argument.

Each is an original analysis **not of genocide, but of what Dr. X has written about it**.

Each is the skeleton of a **thesis** for a critical essay.
The thesis:

How do we craft one for a critical essay?
Determine three things:

What are:

1. The **Topic**?
2. The **Author’s Position** on the Topic?
3. Your Position on the Writer’s Position?
Your Position on the Writer’s Position is the essence of your critical essay.
Your Position on the Writer’s Position is the essence of your critical essay.

But before you can have a position on her position, you must be sure you understand it.
1. What is the Topic?

Ask yourself:

• What do you know about it?
• Whom else have you read about it?
• What other views on it are out there?
• What controversies/debates exist about it?
• Why is it important/relevant?
1. What is the Topic?

Ask yourself:

• What do you know about it?
• Whom else have you read about it?
• What other views on it are out there?
• What controversies/debates exist about it?
• Why is it important/relevant?

Once you understand the topic, next ask yourself.... =>
2. What is the **Writer’s Position** on the Topic?

- **Who’s the writer?** Affiliations. Motivations. Biases. Ulterior motives/agenda
- **What’s her tone?** Approving, distrustful, neutral, critical, insistent, defensive, vehement....
- **What are her main points of argument?** Make sure you know them, point by point.  
  *We can’t critique them if we don’t know them.*
- **How does she explain them?** Is her position clear, logical, complete, intellectually sound? Does she address **counter-arguments**?
- **How does she support them?** What evidence, scholarship, facts, studies, etc. does she present? Are they credible?
Once we have considered the writer’s position, we can proceed to the essence of the critical essay:
3. What is **Your Position** on his/her position?

Are you convinced? Do you agree? Why or why not?
3. What is **Your Position** on his/her position?

Are you convinced? Do you agree? Why or why not?

*Some issues you might have with the essay are:*
3. What is **Your Position** on his/her position?

Are you convinced? Do you agree? Why or why not?

*Some issues you might have with the essay are:*

- Insufficient, selective, and/or inappropriate evidence
- Obvious bias
- Holes in logic; logical fallacies
- Failure to address significant findings, scholarship, or arguments
- Misinterpretation of information or arguments
3. What is **Your Position** on his/her position?

Are you convinced? Do you agree? Why or why not?

*Some issues you might have with the essay are:*

- Insufficient, selective, and/or inappropriate evidence
- Obvious bias
- Holes in logic; logical fallacies
- Failure to address significant findings, scholarship, or arguments
- Misinterpretation of information or arguments

**Make a list** of weaknesses and strengths, **give examples for each**, and **decide on your main points of critique.**
Those main points of critique will form the thesis of your critical essay.
Those main points of critique will form the **thesis** of your critical essay.

Remember that the thesis introduces **not just the content, but the structure** of a paper.
Those main points of critique will form the thesis of your critical essay.

Remember that the thesis introduces not just the content, but the structure of a paper.

Once you have determined your thesis, now you can....
4. Plan your essay’s structure
I. In your Introduction:
• Summarize your position on the author’s position – your thesis.
• Provide any necessary background or context.
II. In the Body: Get specific. Detail her arguments and your evaluation of them, point by point. 

_In doing so, you might:_

• Compare/contrast with another author’s position
• Pose a counterargument or counterexample
• Critique her logic, sources, evidence, and/or tone
• Discuss the relevance, originality, or importance of her argument
III. In your Conclusion: Summarize your analysis and the implications of her text for the topic/field.
III. In your Conclusion: Summarize your analysis and the implications of her text for the topic/field.

_In doing so, you might:_

- Address how this author contributes to the conversation
- Point to broader implications of her argument
- Identify a problem
- Suggest a need for further research
- Answer: “So what?” Why does this matter?
The full outline:

I. Intro: Summarize your position on the author’s position. Provide any necessary background or context.

II. Body: Get specific. Detail her arguments and your evaluation of them, point by point.

III. Concl: Summarize your analysis and the implications of her text for the topic/field.
Long term benefits!

Learning to write a strong critical essay can help you, beyond acing your course, to:

• Improve critical thinking skills
• Better understand the complexities of your field
• Join the conversations that are important to your field
Further Resources


• For one-on-one writing assistance, contact:
  Megan Grumbling, at [mgrumbling@une.edu](mailto:mgrumbling@une.edu)
  or
  John Daugherty, at [jdaugherty@une.edu](mailto:jdaugherty@une.edu)