

The Critical Essay

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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:

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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:

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Both are possible theses for a critical essay on *Breaking Dawn*.

A Critical Essay is similar

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*Remember: Critique **Treatment**, not Topic.*

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

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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**?

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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?

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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 to proceed to the **essence of the critical essay**:

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

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- Insufficient, selective, and/or inappropriate evidence
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Make a list of weaknesses and strengths, give examples for each, and decide on your main points of critique.

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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.

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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

- Outline of a Critical Essay on *The Shawshank Redemption*:
http://uwc.cah.ucf.edu/files/handouts/Outline_Critical_Essay.pdf
- For one-on-one writing assistance, contact:
Megan Grumbling, at mgrumbling@une.edu
or
John Daugherty, at jdaugherty@une.edu