

# 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

- Outline of a Critical Essay on *The Shawshank Redemption*:  
[http://uwc.cah.ucf.edu/files/handouts/Outline Critical Essay.pdf](http://uwc.cah.ucf.edu/files/handouts/Outline_Critical_Essay.pdf)
- 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)