

## WRITING CRITICAL ESSAYS

When literature professors assign you to "write a paper," what exactly do they want you to do? Some instructors are precise about assignments: they may specify a topic or even a thesis; they may supply the evidence on which you are to comment. Often, though—especially in more advanced English courses—the assignment is "open." What, then, is your professor looking for?

Probably he or she expects you to write a "critical essay," a relatively brief paper in which you will apply your ingenuity, creativity, and analytical skills to confronting and explaining a literary text. A paper qualifies as a critical essay when it makes an original observation about a work of literature while answering the question, "well, so what?"

You may find yourself a bit overcome at the prospect of coming up with something original to say about a work by Chaucer, Shakespeare, Austen, or Faulkner: haven't professional scholars been writing everything that could possibly be said, for decades if not for centuries? Intimidated by this assumption, many students go to the library and look up what "the critics" have said before trying to work on criticism of their own. I don't think that's a good way to go about it. Even if you are assigned to write a "research paper" (which differs from a critical essay in that it requires you to consult and cite other scholars' work), you will find the writing less difficult if you work out your own critical position on a text before consulting other sources. You can always revise your ideas and your essay as your understanding of the text increases. For this, after all, is the purpose of writing critical essays: to come to a more complete understanding of a given work of literature and to communicate that understanding to another reader.

### WHAT CRITICAL ESSAYS DO

"Critical," in literary matters, does not carry the negative connotations of "finding fault" that the word has in common usage. Most critical essays either imply or express a great deal of enthusiasm for the works they discuss. The reason is simple: it's much more productive to spend time thinking and writing about a poem, play, story, or novel you enjoyed reading than to dwell on one you didn't like in the first place. Devoting the necessary hours to tearing apart a work you found boring or offensive or amateurish can be depressing.

In literary study, critical essays usually have one of three main goals. They can aim primarily to describe, evaluate, or interpret a text. All essays will combine some elements of each activity. For instance, "evaluation" is implicit in every critical essay: even if you don't set out to prove how good a particular text is, you imply that it has value when you choose it as the subject for critical study. Still, every essay's main point, or thesis, should focus on one of these

three main questions: "How does this text work?", "Is this text any good?", or "What does this text mean?".

## **THE DESCRIPTIVE CRITICAL ESSAY.**

When you write a descriptive critical essay, the main question you are trying to answer is: "How does this literary text work? How does it get its meaning across?" The broad term for this kind of study is "poetics," or-as Jonathan Culler has defined it-the study of the codes and conventions, the recurring patterns and familiar structures, that make it possible for literary texts to have "meaning" (37). In student writing, the descriptive critical essay usually focuses on specific features of one text, and sometimes compares a given text to a model of the genre, or type of literature, it belongs to.

For example, if you are writing about a Shakespearian sonnet, you may want to describe the ways it conforms to and deviates from the Elizabethan sonnet form. Does it have the proper number of lines, arranged in a typical sonnet rhyme-scheme? Does its meter conform strictly to iambic pentameter? Is its imagery limited to typical sonnet conventions? Does it follow a line of argument common to sonnets? Sometimes, the answer will be "no." It's in the nature of texts to deviate somewhat from their generic models: often, in understanding a poem's uniqueness, we can understand the poem itself more clearly. If an author is writing within a certain genre and he or she chooses to violate some of the "rules" of that genre, you can infer some significance from that choice.

Depending on how long the essay is to be, you may have to select a particular feature of the text to describe. Say you are writing about the formal features of *Huckleberry Finn*. You might want to describe the way Mark Twain uses dialect to characterize the people in the novel. Or you might be interested in describing the effect that Huck's narration has on the perspective of the story. Or you might look at the placement of the chapter breaks and their impact on the novel's pace. Or you might want to examine the effect of Twain's juxtaposing scenes of humor with scenes of pathos. These are only a few of the possible topics you might develop for a descriptive critical essay on this novel-pursuing any one of them will bring you closer to an understanding of how *Huckleberry Finn* works and, by extension, how novels work in general. Sometimes you can gain added insight by combining two descriptive approaches to one text: for instance, you could consider the role dialect plays in humorous scenes.

The advantage of the descriptive essay is that it gives you an entry into the workings of the text you are studying. The conventions and anti-conventions you describe are not difficult to uncover and are relatively easy to defend or "prove": there they are, in black and white, between the covers of the book. As you understand their workings in one text, you come to understand the genre more clearly. The disadvantage of writing a descriptive essay is that it can be

tricky to develop your topic into an argument or thesis, an answer to the question, "so what?" When you are accounting for the obvious, as many critics so fruitfully do, some creative thinking is necessary for placing your observations in an interesting, provocative context.

## **THE EVALUATIVE CRITICAL ESSAY**

This kind of essay asks about a literary text, "Is it any good?" It's a question that has no trouble addressing the "so what?" of criticism—if the poem, play or novel is "good," it's worth reading; if it's "bad," it's a waste of time, right? What keeps evaluative criticism alive, of course, is that no two readers' standards are ever exactly the same.

The most common form of evaluative essay is the book review, of the kind professional critics write to help prospective readers decide whether to buy a book now, wait until it's out in paperback, look for it in a casual way at the library, or forget about it altogether. Teachers seldom expect students to write evaluative criticism of this kind: if a book is on a syllabus, the instructor undoubtedly feels it's worth reading. Sometimes, though, you may be writing to disagree with an instructor's choice; or you may want to propose a defense for a text that is not on the syllabus. Sometimes, too, instructors ask you to explain in an essay why you like or dislike a particular work they have assigned.

The number-one requirement for evaluative criticism is that you must make your standards of judgement explicit. Maybe you have a "gut reaction" to a particular book: reading *Pride and Prejudice* might make you feel elated or irritated, excited or bored. (I feel thrilled every time I pick it up; I know many people who retch at the thought of reading it again.) To explain why you "love" it or "hate" it, however, you need to explore the textual reasons for your response: you need to identify the formal features of texts that you do like, and compare the work in question to your model of "good literature." (What pleases me about Jane Austen, to continue the example, is the way she restricts the point of view in many scenes to her heroine's perspective—thus heightening suspense—while at the same time offering numerous hints revealing the heroine's misperceptions; I love the witty dialogue and the direct access it gives us to the characters' motives; I am continually gratified by the conventional "happy ending" she never fails to deliver.) simply to say that you like certain features of the text is not to make an argument, however; you need to demonstrate how the text achieves the effects you admire.

Therefore, spell out your standards. If you object to the poetic form of Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*, what is the model of good poetry you contrast with it? (e.g., Does good poetry need rhyme and meter? Should it avoid coarse language and direct address to the reader? Why?) If you admire the complexity of the narrative structure in Faulkner's "The Bear," what kind of story do you think it improves upon? (e.g., Are there advantages to Faulkner's scrambling chronology, quoting dialogue without clearly attributing it to characters, and

otherwise departing from the conventions of more traditional short stories? Why?) If you think Fitzgerald's use of symbolism in *The Great Gatsby* is effective, what ideals of symbolism are you assuming? (e.g., Should symbolism be clear and repetitive, or subtle? Should symbolic images carry easily recognizable, "universal" significances, or should they be idiosyncratic and obscure? Why?) Many reviewers leave their aesthetic standards implicit, operating on the assumption that all educated readers can agree upon some unspoken, universal standard of literary quality. Literary criticism, though, has become more self-conscious, recognizing that all critics' judgements are colored by their subjectivity and by the position from which they are speaking: the aesthetic standards of a Chicana poet are likely to differ from those of an Oxford don, but they are no less valid. If you want to judge the artistic value of a text, then, you must be clear about your own position.

Of course, your evaluation of a literary work might depend on extra-literary elements, such as political or religious attitudes. If Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* takes a stance on women's familial duties that offends you, you need to explain your own position before you can evaluate Chopin's; the same is true if your own brand of feminism approves the attitudes you think Chopin's novel endorses. Before you can argue that a text is good or bad, you must establish the values you are following. Readers who don't share your values will be inclined to disagree with your point. The challenge of evaluative criticism is to write it persuasively, alluding to the possibilities for opposition to your argument, and answering potential objections with specific commentary on passages from the text.

### **THE INTERPRETIVE CRITICAL ESSAY.**

In this, the most common kind of student essay, the main question you are asking is, "What does this text mean?" As my illustrations of descriptive and evaluative arguments show, a critical essay always raises questions about a text's meaning. To write a descriptive essay is to address the question: "How does this work transmit meaning?" To write an evaluative essay is to ask: "Why is it worthwhile to think about this text's meaning?" And to write an interpretive essay is directly to ask: "What does this work mean?" Whether the work you are interpreting is on the scale of a haiku verse or *Moby Dick*, the question is never a simple one. How you find and present a meaning will depend on the strategy of interpretation you choose to apply.

The literary-academic world is made up of what Stanley Fish has called "interpretive communities" (11). These are unofficial groups of readers who agree on the best way or ways to get at the meaning of texts. Your instructor—whether or not he or she advertises or even realizes it—belongs to one or more of these communities; so do you. The study of literature is partly the process of discovering which of the communities you want to embrace.

[SIDE BAR-this is to be placed in a box, set apart from the chapter on "Writing Critical Essays," near the section on "The Interpretive Essay."] *Which interpretive strategies does your professor use to decipher texts? Which strategies make sense to you? For detailed descriptions of current trends in literary theory, see Chapter 5; here are brief definitions of some common approaches, which are seldom found in isolation, and usually occur in some combination:*

FORMALISM finds meaning in the direct relation between a text's ideas and its form, the connection between what a text says and the way it's said. Formalists may find tension, irony, or paradox in this relation, but they usually resolve it into unity and coherence in meaning.

DECONSTRUCTION, too, looks at the relation of a text's ideas to the way the ideas are expressed. Unlike formalists, though, deconstructionists find meaning in the ways the text breaks down: the ways the rhetoric contradicts the ostensible message, for instance.

SEMIOTICS looks at the "codes," or ways of making a text intelligible, that come into play when readers encounter texts. The semiotician attends to "signs" that are linguistic (i.e., the connotations and denotations of words), as well as those that are outside language (e.g., the typography and cover-illustration of a book) and those that refer to the operations of language (e.g., literary conventions).

HISTORICAL criticism finds meaning by looking at a text within the framework of the prevailing ideas and assumptions of its historical era, or by considering its contents within the context of "what really happened" during the period that produced the text.

LITERARY-HISTORICAL criticism finds significance in the ways a particular work resembles or differs from other works of its period and/or genre. (This interpretive strategy relies heavily on the techniques of descriptive poetics, differing from poetics in its main goal: to determine what a text means, rather than "how it means.")

BIOGRAPHICAL criticism looks for a text's significance in terms of its author, either by comparing the events and attitudes in the text with those in the author's life, or by comparing some features of the text with other works the author wrote.

POLITICAL criticism looks at the ideas in a text through an explicit overlay of political ideology (for example, Marxism or some forms of feminist theory) to find meaning.

PSYCHOANALYTIC criticism adopts the systems of explanation suggested by Freud (or later theorists who have built upon Freud's work, such as Lacan or the feminist psychoanalysts) to interpret what a text signifies.

ARCHETYPAL criticism traces cultural and psychological "myths" that shape the meaning of texts.

PHENOMENOLOGICAL AND READER-RESPONSE criticism analyze 'the ways "ideal readers" and/or individual readers experience texts, to find meaning in the act of reading itself.

*Combinations are Common:* To mention just a few common possibilities: Biographical critics often rely on psychoanalytic models of interpretation; deconstructionists and formalists can use the tools of semiotics; reader-response criticism is sometimes placed in a historical context (as in studies of audiences' reception of works); and all criticism has political implications (in that it identifies certain texts and issues as deserving critical attention).

The chapter in this book on "The Perspectives of Literary Criticism" will guide you in more detail through the specifics of the various current strategies (see box for brief definitions). For the purpose of writing an interpretive essay, though, it's a good idea to try to determine which strategies are operating in the class you are taking. Does the professor rely exclusively on a Marxist or a Freudian model of interpretation? Does she introduce elements of these schools of thought in combination with other strategies? Does he treat texts as products of their historical context, or approach them as timeless structures? When the instructor does "close readings" of texts, does she look (as formalists do) for unity and coherence of meaning, or does she point out (as deconstructionists do) ways in which parts of the text irreconcilably contradict one another? You need not use the same interpretive strategies your professor is using: remember, though, that you should try to be explicit about how you reach your conclusions on the text's meaning, especially if your strategy is different from that of your intended reader.

The best interpretive essays do three things: 1) They establish the strategy by which you, the essayist, choose to find meaning. They might do this explicitly, by saying something like "I propose to do a Marxist reading of *Pride and Prejudice* in order to examine the assumptions about class relations exhibited in the text," or they may be more subtle, announcing the strategy through certain key words. If, for example, an essay's thesis paragraph refers to "desire," "the mirror stage," and "libidinal impulses," it is almost certainly drawing on psychoanalytic modes of interpretation. 2) They "read," or interpret, the work in question according to that strategy, giving lots of specific examples from the text. And 3) They make a point or an argument. Simply paraphrasing the literary work in your own words is not the same as interpreting it, because a paraphrase will not answer the question, "so what?" You need to place the work's ideas in some context, in order to write persuasively about it. Being self-consciously explicit about your interpretive strategy can help you develop a thesis.

## **HOW TO GET STARTED**

Doubtless, you will begin working on a critical essay unofficially for some time before you actually set pen to paper. Some people do their best thinking in the shower, or on the jogging trail, or in conversation with friends: working out a thesis in circumstances like these is not procrastination, but rather an important stage in the process of getting ready to write. To insure that an argument will come to you early enough to be useful, however, you should pace yourself by going through certain steps on your way toward writing the paper. These steps may intersect with one another and may be repeated at different stages of the process, but I have listed them here in the order in which I try to go through them myself, when writing literary criticism.

## **COLLECT YOUR DATA.**

**TAKE NOTES.** As you read and re-read the text, you should underline, highlight, star, or otherwise mark all the passages that interest you. When I am working on a long text, I keep track of the interesting passages by making notes to record page numbers for example of themes or techniques that appeal to me. I like to make these notes on the blank pages and inside covers of my paperback edition of the text. This way I don't lose them, and I'm always glad to recover my previous work when I return to the same text for another project. (See this book's chapter on "Reading Fiction" for more advice on collecting data by "Indexing" a text.)

**USE YOUR JOURNAL.** If you are keeping a reading journal, either by choice or assignment, it will be an ideal source of inspiration (see Chapter 9).

**ASK QUESTIONS.** As you read, consult your own intellectual and emotional response to the text. Watch yourself reading, and mark any parts of the text that you found especially moving, persuasive, confusing, or problematic. Write out your questions as they occur to you, for instance, "Why does this passage make me cry?" or "Why is this description so difficult to visualize?" or "What is this novel's position on racism?" or "Why is this dialogue so hilarious?" Such questions can lead you to a thesis for any of the three modes of critical essays I have described.

**LOOK AT THE TEXT'S FORM.** Try to analyze the structure of the text. If it is a poem, consider its rhyme scheme, meter, verse form, and arrangement of ideas; if it is a novel, describe for yourself its point of view, sequence of events, chapter divisions, and narrative voice. Ask yourself: to what sub-genre does the structure conform? (A text that fits the genre "novel," for instance, might be a Gothic romance, a "social-problem novel," a *roman á clef*, a work of fantasy or science fiction, an epistolary novel, an "experimental novel," a work of psychological realism, an historical novel, a "novel of sentiment," a mystery novel—or, most likely, a unique combination of some features of several sub-genres.) In what ways does it diverge from the expected model? (Texts always do.) What is the significance of the author's having chosen this particular structure to convey the ideas in this work? For some guidance on appropriate questions to ask about particular kinds of texts, see the chapters in this book on drama, poetry, and fiction.

**LOOK FOR FAMILIAR "MOVES."** Identify the literary conventions in the text. Does the sonnet's persona claim that the poem will make his beloved immortal? Does the novel's narrator say that the heroine is too beautiful to describe? Does the hero of the play sometimes address himself to the audience, in asides?. If so, the writers are following conventions of the genres in which they are writing. The more literature you have read, the more readily you will recognize the habits that typify the period and genre you are studying. (Chapters 2, 3, and 4 of this book will help you identify some typical conventions.) Ask yourself (and your

instructor) where you have seen certain patterns of conventions before. If the work you are studying is either remarkably conventional or noticeably unconventional in any respect, this might lead you to a thesis.

**INTERPRET FIGURES OF SPEECH.** Think about any imagery or figurative language you have noticed in the text. What symbolic patterns emerge? What are the vehicle and tenor of any metaphors you find? (If you are unfamiliar with the intricacies of figurative language, consult a literary handbook or your instructor.) Is there any way to read the text as an allegory for ideas that it doesn't mention directly? Make notes of your answers: abstract ideas like these can be easy to lose track of or forget.

**LOOK UP UNFAMILIAR WORDS.** Especially if you are working on a poem, and especially if it was written before the twentieth century, you should make sure that you understand the sense in which each word is being used. Words that appear in seventeenth-century poetry, for instance, may look like modern words, but may have carried meanings or connotations that have become obsolete. For example, when John Donne mentions "trepidation of the spheres," he does not mean that the planets are alarmed or frightened; for Donne, "trepidation" also referred to a Ptolemaic explanation for planetary movements. The modern denotation might also be there, and might be relevant to your interpretation, but it's important not to overlook the original meaning.

The *Oxford English Dictionary*, available in every library, is the best source for the history of individual words in the language. It arranges definitions chronologically and provides many examples from literary and common language, so you can use it to determine exactly what meanings the word had during the era in which your author was writing. Even schools of criticism that question the advisability of trying to ascertain "authorial intention" concede that a precise grasp of the author's diction is essential to understanding literary works.

### **MAKE CONNECTIONS.**

As you take notes and look over the passages that you have marked, try to establish any meaningful patterns among the material you have collected. How you determine the significance of these patterns (or the point that you want to make about them) will depend, of course, on the interpretive strategy or critical stance you adopt. Not coincidentally, your strategy will have shaped your selection of examples as well, so the move between the "collecting" and "connecting" steps will not be as tricky as you might think.

At the connecting stage, a good idea is to play a little game of "Jeopardy" with yourself: look at the data you've collected from the text, and figure out what questions they might be the answers to. This is also the stage where you will begin eliminating some of the data as less relevant to the questions you find yourself raising. Put those data aside, and think about them again when you

must write a research paper or essay exam for this course. Concentrate for now on the patterns that emerge as you begin to think about your data in terms of your general questions.

What do I mean by looking for "patterns"? I mean that you should look at the examples you have collected and try to see what they might have in common with one another: the parallels among them will be your key to a thesis. A pattern might look perfectly consistent, or it might have irregularities and "glitches"—in either case, it can direct you to an argument. At this point you should try to decide whether you are most inclined to describe, evaluate, or interpret the work in your essay.

Your decision will depend on the patterns you have noticed and on your own critical inclinations. Say, for example, you are studying a sonnet and you have noticed that the meter in some lines varies drastically from iambic pentameter. If you want to interpret the sonnet and you are inclined to do a formalist reading, you can ask yourself, "Why is the metric variation appropriate to the ideas expressed in these lines? Why might the poet have wanted to draw special attention to these particular moments in the poem? How does that attention color the poem's meaning?" Or, for another example, in reading *Paradise Lost* you might have been interested in the seemingly heroic attractiveness of Satan. If you want to "deconstruct" the poem, you might begin by pursuing questions like, "Why does Milton's poem claim his purpose is 'to justify the ways of God to man,' then proceed to inspire so much admiration for the arch-enemy of man and God?" Or, for still another example, you might want to do a feminist reading of Charles Dickens' *Great Expectations*, which could prompt you to ask questions such as, "What do the portrayals of Miss Havisham and Estella imply about relations between the sexes in mid-nineteenth-century England?" (This would lead to historical criticism.) What do they reveal about Dickens' own attitudes toward women, or the attitude of the culture in which Dickens was writing?" (This would inspire biographical, psychoanalytic, and/or political criticism.) "Is my sympathy for them likely to be different, depending on whether I read as a woman or as a man?" (This would fall under the rubric of readerresponse.) Try thinking about your data in terms of the questions that interest you most, and experiment with some possible answers.

### **"SO WHAT?": CREATE A THESIS.**

Once you have begun collecting some of your examples under the banner of one main question, you should begin to see the general answer that will account for the examples you want to use. This answer will become your thesis: the statement about the text that you will support with examples throughout your essay. The thesis statement you develop at this stage will probably not be identical to the one that controls the final draft of your paper. It will evolve as you think in more detail about your data and your question; you will be continually re-conceiving and rephrasing your thesis as you draft your essay, and

you will probably have to re-write the thesis statement several times toward the end of the writing process, to make sure it reflects the argument you are making in your essay's final draft. Nevertheless, it's important to formulate your main argument now, as a tentative guide to writing your essay.

**GENERATE SOME IDEAS.** This is the point where techniques of brainstorming can be very helpful, especially the approach that composition theorists have called "focused free writing." In spite of its liberated-sounding name, free writing is a strictly rule-governed exercise that can help you work through frustrating blocks which may be delaying your arrival at a thesis.

Here's the technique: write one of the questions you asked during the "collect" stage at the top of a clean piece of paper. (For example, "Why does Satan in *Paradise Lost* so often seem like the hero?") Set a timer or alarm clock to ring in five or ten minutes. Once the time period has begun, set your pen or pencil to the page and explore possible answers to that question. Write rapidly, without stopping or even slowing down, until all the time has elapsed. Do not pause to make corrections, cross out words, re-read what you've written, or collect your thoughts. Just keep writing, and try to make as accurate a record as possible of what passes through your mind. If you can't think of anything to say, write "I can't think of anything to say," over and over, until you think of something. (This quickly becomes very boring and motivates you efficiently to think of something to say.)

Free writing in many ways resembles the techniques that Toby Fulwiler describes in this book's chapter on "Journal Writing," and it carries many of the same benefits. If you repeat the exercise several times, preferably over a period of a few days, you will almost certainly come up with original and arguable answers to your questions, one of which can become your thesis. The technique is tiring and leads to temporary bouts with writers' cramp. But, like aerobic exercise, it can produce benefits (such as self-discipline and a way to conquer "writer's block") that are probably worth the pain.

**FORMULATE THE THESIS.** Perhaps the best way to go about developing your thesis at this point is to talk it over with others. By all means, take advantage of any in-class workshops or discussions your instructor may have planned for this purpose, but if you can you should find as many opportunities as possible to explore your ideas for the paper in conversations. Visit your professor during office hours, make appointments with any teaching assistants or writing tutors available to you, or discuss your ideas with friends and classmates. Read your free writings to any willing auditor, and talk over the possibilities for basing an argument on them.

At this juncture, one of the most useful questions you can ask of others is: "What are some plausible arguments against the point I am trying to make?" If there are no such arguments, then your point is probably too obvious and will make a weak thesis. If plausible arguments do exist, be glad. Your thesis is

controversial enough to be interesting and you will want to refute or concede those arguments in the course of writing an essay that is persuasive, as all good essays should be.

Finding a thesis that is controversial will help you develop an answer to the big "so what." For instance, this statement would not make an arguable thesis: "In *The Great Gatsby*, Fitzgerald explores and examines the American Dream through the perspective of his narrator, Nick Carraway and the experience of his hero, Jay Gatsby." Anyone who has read the novel would probably agree that this statement is true—the novel does other things, too, but among the things it does are "exploring and examining the American Dream." To answer "so what?," an argumentative thesis must go into the how or why, must make a point.

Possible arguments for descriptive essays on this topic might be: "Through the use of narrative flashbacks, Fitzgerald reveals Nick's and Jay's parallel disillusionment with the American Dream," or "The symbolic images Fitzgerald associates with the American Dream combine with the movement of the plot to reveal ambivalence about the attractiveness of the Dream." Possibilities for an evaluative essay might include, "The narrator's eye for descriptive detail and ear for believable conversation make *Gatsby* an enjoyable spoof of the humorous side of the American Dream," or "Fitzgerald's tendency to slip into caricature—in the names, personalities, and appearances of his characters—prevents an otherwise realistic novel from being a serious critique of the American Dream." The possibilities for interpretive theses are endless: whatever strategy you choose, you will find yourself accounting for how or why Fitzgerald does what he does with the American Dream in this novel. For instance, a biographical critic might argue, "Jay Gatsby's pursuit of the American Dream parallels Fitzgerald's own experience and predicts his personal fate"; a historical critic might say, "The treatment of the American Dream in *Gatsby* simultaneously exemplifies and exposes prevailing attitudes in the 1920s toward the equation of prosperity with happiness." A feminist critic given to archetypal criticism might argue that "The portrayals of Daisy Fay and Jordan Baker as bitch-goddesses points to the misogyny at the heart of Fitzgerald's American Dream." For each of these theses there are potential counter-arguments. None of them is safely "right" or strictly "wrong"—their strength will depend on the quality of evidence you bring to bear in proving them.

When you think you know what you want to argue, write the thesis out in as coherent a form as possible. You may not want to state it so directly in your essay, but you should have a firm, idea of it in your own mind and in your notes. This is as true for someone writing a scholarly book as for someone writing a critical essay: you need a clear, interesting answer to the question, "What's it about and why does it matter?"

When you eventually do develop the thesis into an introduction for your essay, remember to phrase it in an arguable form. If you shrink from beginning

an essay with a statement such as "In this essay I will argue that Fitzgerald uses the color green in *The Great Gatsby* to symbolize hope, envy, and the future." your instincts are good. Such a sentence is not a thesis: it is an announcement of the paper's topic. Instead, try to make a direct statement about how or why Fitzgerald uses the symbol, along the lines of the examples I proposed above. This would be a debatable statement, and therefore a thesis or an argument. But it doesn't need a label like, "My thesis is x" or "In this essay I will argue y." In a short critical paper, self-reference isn't necessary and can sometimes be too obvious.

This is not to say, however, that you shouldn't use the word "I." Not every professor would agree with me, but I think you should use it. Why pretend to be objective? Since your argument depends in every way on your selections-of a topic, of examples, of interpretive strategies-it has to reflect you, and it should be written in a voice that is recognizably yours. If you are making a statement that refers to your own experience, your own feeling, your own judgement, it only makes sense to attribute it to yourself. Remember, however, that (unless you are writing a particularly subjective kind of reader-response criticism) you are not the topic of the paper, even if you are its "subject": the poem, play, story, or novel is the object you have in view, and your essay should focus attention on the text, rather than on itself. And even if you can't be objective as you write about a text, you can and should be logical. Try, therefore, not to fall back on using "I" as an excuse for faulty reasoning: rather than using disclaimers such as "I'm not really sure, but I get the feeling that Fitzgerald is trying to say something about the American Dream. work on figuring out x; what you do think about the topic and presenting appropriate evidence to support your idea.

### **ORGANIZE THE ESSAY.**

Unless you've had so much experience writing from formal outlines that you are addicted to using them, don't make yourself do it. Instead, arrange your ideas informally, in a list or even a chart or map, to sketch out the order in which you want to bring them up. This will allow you the flexibility to develop new connections and slants on your examples as you write.

**SHAPE YOUR ARGUMENT.** Decide now what rhetorical strategy you will use in the arrangement of your essay. Will it be deductive, that is, begin with a general statement of your point, then proceed to illustrate it with specific examples arranged around sub-points? Or will it be inductive, arguing through specific examples that "build" to a concluding statement?

Some student writers prefer the inductive form for the element of suspense it injects into essays, but I suspect that few teachers appreciate that approach. If you arrange your argument deductively, you make it much easier for your reader to determine how well you are making your point. You also give the impression that you know what you are talking about from the start.

For the strongest rhetorical effect in a deductive essay, you can follow certain conventions for arranging your evidence. Put the most convincing points in the most memorable positions: the beginning and the end of the argument. Less persuasive evidence can be "buried" in the middle of the paper's body. You have to consult your own conscience as to whether each piece of evidence is strong enough to be used at all.

**BUILD IN TRANSITIONS.** In determining the order of your arguments, you should also think about the transitions you can make among individual points. Sometimes the same example will illustrate two points; if so, it would be a good "pivot" between them. Sometimes one of your points will qualify, alter, or even contradict another. Take these relations among your ideas into account as you work out the initial organization.

**DON'T SUPPRESS CONFLICT.** If you find that your argument doesn't "work" perfectly, that certain aspects of the text cannot be reconciled with it or that in some ways it is self-contradictory, do your best not to ignore or bury the problem. Confront it, think about it, write about it—you may even decide to incorporate it into the essay's final draft. I believe that a paper which recognizes, acknowledges, and attempts to deal with its difficulties is much more interesting and valuable for the writer and the reader, than a paper which oversimplifies issues in order to gloss over problems. Writing literary criticism is never easy. It's perfectly all right for an essay to reflect this fact of academic life, as long as it does so intelligently and self-consciously.

## **CONVENTIONS OF WRITING ON LITERARY TOPICS**

Of course, once you have settled on an argument and a basic organization for your paper, you will write the critical essay as you would any formal written assignment: everything you know about composing, revising, and editing holds true for writing about literature. There are only a few respects in which the actual writing of literary criticism may diverge from your writing in other fields.

**VERB TENSE.** When writing about actions that occur in a literary work, use the present tense (e.g., "Hamlet cannot decide whether to take action," not "Hamlet could not decide . . ."). When writing about events that occurred in history, use the past tense (e.g., "Shakespeare composed his plays for a dramatic company in which he sometimes acted."). When attributing ideas to an author through what he or she says in a literary work, use the present tense (e.g., "Shakespeare writes that 'all the world's a stage'.").

**QUOTATIONS.** Be sure that quotations are perfectly accurate: check them against the text. If a quotation is four or more lines long, indent each line ten spaces from the left margin in order to set the passage off from your own prose. When you indent a quotation, omit the quotation marks. If it is shorter than four

lines, enclose it in quotation marks and treat it typographically as part of your own sentence. If you quote fewer than four consecutive lines from a poem, indicate the line breaks with a slash (/).

In writing about literature, as in all kinds of writing, you should be very careful, when you use quotations, to integrate them into your argument. Introduce every quotation from a primary source with at least one sentence or phrase that establishes its connection to what you have said in the paragraph so far (use phrases such as "in a typical example," or "in one exceptional case," or "for instance"). Then, after reproducing the quotation, be sure to comment on it specifically, pointing out the details that support your argument (this might mean paraphrasing the quotation in your own words to relate it to your argument, or it might mean drawing your reader's attention to the text's use of certain vocabulary, images, rhetorical moves, metric variations, or whatever you mean to highlight by using the quotation).

DOCUMENTATION AND USE OF SOURCES. Consult the new *M.L.A. Guide* (second edition) for the simplest, most streamlined rules of documentation in literary essays. Generally speaking, a critical essay should have few or no footnotes. List the editions you are using under "Works Cited" at the end of the paper. Directly after each quotation you use as evidence, give the page number (for fiction), line number (for poetry), or act, scene and line number (for drama) in parentheses. Punctuate your sentences containing quotations like this:

We can tell that Gulliver has passed beyond the boundaries of reason when he rejects the kindly advances of the humane Portuguese captain: "I only desired he would lend me two clean shirts, which having been washed since he wore them, I believed would not so much defile me" (337).

Remember to comment on the quotation after citing it; be sure to specify your reasons for claiming the quotation makes the point you claim it makes.

If you paraphrase ideas you found in other critics' work without quoting them directly, be careful to avoid charges of plagiarism by attributing the ideas to their source within your essay. You can use a formula like: "As Mary Poovey has pointed out, early nineteenth-century women's novels tend simultaneously to reinforce and to subvert the image of the 'Proper Lady.'" (You should attribute ideas and phrases to critics who have published work on them, even if the idea occurred to you before reading the criticism. See the chapters by James Holstun and Richard Sweterlitsch for more detailed advice on avoiding indirect plagiarism.) If you are paraphrasing a general idea from someone else's work, you will list the secondary source under "works cited" at the end of your essay. If you are borrowing a phrase or idea that occurs on a particular page, you will give that page number in parentheses in your text-e.g., "(Poovey 38)." If your context makes it clear which writer's work you are referring to, you can eliminate the author's name and give just the page number: "(38)."

Following the new M.L.A. format, you use superscript footnotes or endnotes only for "content notes" that explain, qualify, or elaborate upon points in your essay that you do not want to develop within the body of the paper. Remember, the traditional footnote form that relied on "ibid." and "op cit.," so difficult to compose and so tiresome to follow, is obsolete in literary studies. Learn to operate within the new system. Once you've mastered it, documentation becomes much easier for both the writer and the reader to use.

### **WHY ARE YOU WRITING A CRITICAL ESSAY?**

Admittedly, the process I am describing requires an enormous amount of time, energy, and concentration. Perhaps you doubt that all these steps are really what professors expect from you when they tell you to "write a paper." I am willing to concede that we don't always expect to find evidence of all this work when we sit down to grade a paper, but I think most of us do hope to find it. From our point of view it's the process of writing a paper that will contribute to your education, more than the product that comes out of that process. A polished student essay is valuable primarily as a sign of the work and thought that went into it.

Why, after all, do you write critical essays? The obvious answer is "to fill a requirement; to earn a grade." But why do we grade you on this particular assignment; why are critical essays such an important part of the English curriculum, taking priority in most courses over quizzes and exams? A high grade on an examination signifies mastery of the material of a course, but a high grade on an essay shows that you have mastered the modes, of thought that operate in literary studies as a discipline. Your knowledge of narrative forms and poetic devices, of authors' lives and literary periods, will probably have no direct relevance to what you do in later life, unless you teach English (as only a small minority of students of literature decide to do). But your mastery of literary thinking, of the ways that critics approach and decipher texts, is an important indicator of the flexibility of your mind. And writing critical essays is the best way—in some courses, the only way—both to develop and express that mastery.

## **WORKS CITED**

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