

Guidelines for Writing Critical Essays

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Please refer to the instructions below when writing critical essays. They cover most of the aspects of university-level critical essays written for English classes.

STRUCTURE

Each essay consists of an **introduction**, a **body**, and a **conclusion**:

Introduction

- Introduce the text, author, and the main idea of the essay in the same sentence. The main idea must relate to the essay prompt.
- Be specific when giving the **title(s)** of any literary text(s) you will be looking at. Give the full title on first reference. Longer titles can be abbreviated in subsequent references. For example: *The Life and Strange Surprising Adventures of Robinson Crusoe* should become *Robinson Crusoe* the second time it is referred to.
- Refer to authors by their full names on first reference in all but a very few cases. You do not need to write “William Shakespeare” or “John Milton.” You probably don’t need to write “Edmund Spenser,” but that’s a judgment call. You do need to write the full names of “Henry James,” “James Joyce,” and just about everyone else.
- Do not refer to a text simply as a “book.” What sort of book are you dealing with? An encyclopedia? A play? A novel? Be specific.
- Explain the background of your essay’s main argument by offering a *brief preview* of its *main points*, which you will develop in the **body** of your essay.
- Clearly state the essay’s main argument in a sentence that answers the prompt. This statement might fit in the first sentence of your essay. It might be better in the final sentence of your **introduction**. This is your **thesis statement**.
- A good **introduction** takes up about half a page. It takes some time to introduce the text, author, argument, and the argument’s main points. Do not rush through this. This is where you signal how your paper is structured and how you hope it will be read.

Body

- Each of the main points mentioned in your introductory paragraph should be dealt with in a separate paragraph. If you mention four points in your introduction, the body of your essay should be at least four paragraphs long.
- Some main points require more than a single paragraph. Use your judgment to determine if this is the case with your paper.
- Some main points require paragraphs relating them to one another. Points one and two might add up to something when considered together, in which case you will end up with another paragraph. There is no magic number of paragraphs. Many

- students are taught that good essays all have five paragraphs: an introduction, a paragraph for each of three, and exactly three points, and a conclusion. This is only one formula, and not always the best one. Think of ways to vary this.
- Each paragraph should state its point, illustrate that point, then make a critical statement about it. Think **point, example, critical statement**. This can be too formulaic, and paragraphs will vary in how they present these elements, but most should have all three.
 - The opening sentence of each paragraph should clearly state its topic.
 - Critical essays must include specific references to the text(s) they focus on either by *paraphrasing* or *directly quoting* from the text. Do not, however, just drop quotes in and assume the quotes have made your point. The quotes are the author's point. You need to explicate the quotations in order to make your **critical statements**. This is where the "critical" part comes in, or the "argument." All critical essays have arguments.

Conclusion

- Remind the reader what your **thesis** is, but not by repeating it in the exact same language you used in the **introduction**.
- Briefly review the main points of your argument and explain how they add up to prove your **thesis**.
- A good conclusion takes as much space as a good introduction. A sentence or two will not satisfactorily explain how the main points of your argument added up.

Title

- Give your essays descriptive titles. The title of a critical essay should tell the reader something about the text, author, and main idea of the paper. Some examples of good titles:
 - "Edith Wharton at War: Civilized Space in Troubled Times"
 - "Rossetti's Goblin Marketing: Sweet to Tongue and Sound to Eye"
 - "Hemingway's Stein: Another Misplaced Review"
- Bad titles:
- Essay 1 (a label, not a title)
 - "Ernest Hemingway's *A Moveable Feast*" (what about it?)
 - "A Beautiful Day" (where, when, and why do we care?)

LAYOUT

- Always **double-space** your essays. This makes it easier for me to read and write comments.
- Always **number** pages.
- Always **indent** paragraphs. These essays are not HTML documents, so they should not look like them.
- Respect the **word limit**. A few words over or under are fine. Many, many words under or over are not so fine.

STYLE

- Be **succinct**. Avoid unnecessary words. It is not “Mr. William Shakespeare.” It’s just “Shakespeare.” Henry James might be “one of the greatest prose stylists in the history of American literature,” but unless you are specifically writing an essay on the greatness of James’s style and its place in the history of American literature, your paper does not need to say this. And etc.
- Avoid repeating yourself.
- A certain level of informality in an essay can be effective, but, for the most part, use the language of scholarly criticism when you write. Do not write things like: “I bet you didn’t know Henry James spent time in Paris. Well, he did.” I have read things like this in student essays, honestly.
- Scholarly language does not need to be a series of long sentences built with big words. Use your own vocabulary in a serious way.

MECHANICS

- In discussing the events depicted in a literary text, use the **PRESENT TENSE** consistently throughout, even though most texts are written in several past tenses. For example, “Hemingway goes to visit Gertrude Stein early on in *A Moveable Feast*,” or, “Hemingway narrates his first meeting with Gertrude Stein in a comic and cutting way.”
- Always read over what you have written carefully and revise it. Look for errors in **content, grammar, spelling, punctuation, diction, and sentence construction**. All of these count when grades are being determined. Have a friend read your paper **OUT LOUD** to you, or read it out loud yourself. You will hear errors you did not see on the page.

TITLES

- **Italicize** the titles of long works (full-length books, plays, epic poems, feature films, operas, etc.)
- Use **quotation marks** for the titles of short works (essays, short stories, shorter poems, articles in newspapers or critical journals, songs, etc.)

DOCUMENTING SOURCES

- Include a **Words Cited** page at the end of every critical essay, even if you only refer to one source.
- All works cited should be listed on this page, listed alphabetically by author’s last name. List works referred to in any way, not just the works you quote or paraphrase.
- Use MLA style for the **Works Cited** page and all other references. A good guide to this can be found at Purdue University’s Writing Lab website:
<http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/747/01/>

QUOTING A LITERARY TEXT

- **All quotations** must be followed in parentheses by exact references:
 - **in prose:** to the correct page: e.g. (33) (*the symbol “pg.” is unnecessary*);
 - **in poetry:** to the correct lines: e.g. (210-213) (*the symbol “ll.” is unnecessary*);
 - **in drama:** the correct Act, Scene and Lines: e.g. (4.2.37-39) (*Roman numerals are no longer necessary*)
- All works quoted in this way must be itemized in the list of **Works Cited**.
- Use quotation marks for **shorter quotations**. Fit the quote into the sentence’s flow. For example: Hemingway is clearly disgusted when he tells us Ford Maddox Ford is “thoroughly and completely happy” after “cutting” a mutual acquaintance, and goes on to say he “felt badly that Ford had been rude to him” (85).
- Isolate **longer quotations – those of four lines or longer**, referred to as **block quotes**). Start them on the line following the text that introduces them, and indent the text twice **DO NOT ITALICIZE LONG QUOTES!** Students often do this, possibly because this is common on the internet. Again, you are not writing a web page. Please do not format your essay like one.
- When leaving out part of a quote in the middle of a passage, indicate this with an **ellipsis**. For example: Hemingway is clearly disgusted at the fact that Ford Maddox Ford is “thoroughly ... happy” ... and goes on to say ...
- Use **square brackets** when adding something to a quote in order to make it fit into your sentence structure or supply necessary information not clear from the quote itself. For example: Hemingway “felt badly that Ford had been rude to [Belloc]” (85).
- When quoting poetry, mark the divisions between lines (referred to as **line breaks**) with / marks. For example: “Shall I compare thee to a summer’s day?/Thou art more lovely and more temperate.” You can use two of these in a quote. A third / means you are going on to quote a fourth line of poetry, and as with prose, you should move to **block quotes** (see above) when you quote four or more lines.