

# Guidelines For Writing Critical Textual Analyses

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In general, the purpose of a **critical** analysis is not just to report on or offer a purely **descriptive** account of some text. That may be useful as a starting point, but your essay must also:

- clarify **theoretical issues**;
- make sure that your **key terms** and **concepts** are properly **defined**;
- **state explicitly** the assumptions and arguments used to support the position taken by the author;
- **evaluate** these positions; and
- **support** your evaluation with good reasons and arguments of your own.

This all requires a good deal of creative and independent thinking. The following will provide you with a number of suggestions and standard problems to avoid.

## A. Don't Write a Book Review

When you are asked to defend a theoretical or philosophical point that is raised in a text, you must **go beyond a description of the contents of the text**. Your assignment is not just to explain the position, but to support, modify, or refute it. That means that you'll have to give reasons for either agreeing or disagreeing with the author.

## B. Choose Quotations Appropriately

If you want to question or support an author's position or argument, you may find it useful to quote the author's version of it for two reasons:

1. You should assume you are writing for a reasonably intelligent but uninformed reader, not for someone who is familiar with the text.
2. You need the author's actual words in order to demonstrate that your argument relates to the position as stated.

You'll want to explain the author's meaning in order to set the stage for what is to be the real point of the essay, viz., **your argument** on the issue. It is important, however, that you choose quotations carefully. In a short paper, the number and length of quotations should be kept to a minimum.

## C. State Your Case Clearly and Accurately

State clearly what thesis or conclusion you are arguing for; don't leave it to the reader to puzzle it out. Do so in one of the introductory paragraphs. You will need to do more than just make an assertion since your essay will undoubtedly have many assertions of relevant facts. You need to say something such as "I intend to argue that..." or "I shall attempt to show that..." Don't hesitate to use "I" or say "I am going to..." Such phrases provide a quick, clear, and economical way of highlighting your thesis for the reader.

Make it a thesis specifying facts, stating that something is the case. It should be possible to specify the kind of observation that would prove it false. "I'm going to explore..." or "I'm going to consider..." will not serve as thesis statements. They give only a vague indication of the direction your analysis is taking.

## D. Argue for Your Position

1. Make sure you have the **evidence** or reasons sufficient to support the conclusion you are trying to reach.
2. **Do not offer unsupported assertions as argument**. To repeatedly assert an opinion, even if you disguise the assertion in different language, does not count as an argument. It does not give the reader any reasons for accepting the opinion.
3. **Choose and use examples wisely**. To establish a sound basis for your conclusion, your examples have to be chosen from a variety of circumstances including all factors which could be relevant to your conclusion. This will involve choosing examples from different kinds of circumstances.
4. **Don't assume special or privileged knowledge on the reader's part**. Let the reader know, by means of footnotes or some such device, where to gain access to the information used in your paper.

**E. Appeal, if you can, to experiences or observations which are common to many if not all readers.**

## **F. Define Key Terms**

**Define and explain the key terms of your argument.** In order to show how your argument supports your thesis statement, it will often be necessary to let your reader know how your key terms are being used. For example, if you argue that artistic values are autonomous and universal, you would have to define "autonomy" and "universality" so that the reader understands the meaning that you attach to these terms on which your argument depends.

**Illustrate your definition (if possible) with familiar examples.** In doing this, you help the reader hold the idea in mind. This has the advantage of enabling the reader to see how the ideas apply to our actual experiences and helps make an abstract argument come alive.

**Be sure that you have control over your vocabulary.** Since argument turns on the precise sense of the terms used, don't use any terms you have not made part of your working vocabulary.

**Be as brief as possible in making your point effectively.** Any unnecessary discussion or digression is likely to distract your reader. In a brief critical analysis, one supposes that each thing an author says serves some purpose. When a reader discovers that this is not so, their attention is likely to wander.

## **Anticipate Objections**

**Be open to the weaknesses of your own position and be sure to address the significant counter-arguments.** If there is any point in arguing to prove your case, it must be possible, and perhaps common, to view the matter differently from the way you propose. If you are to convince the reader that your way of looking at the matter is correct, you will need to show that the alternative positions are mistaken.

## **Summarize the Premises Used to Establish Your Thesis**

If you cannot identify and enumerate the points which lead to your conclusion, how do you or the reader know that you have a valid argument leading to that conclusion?

## **Strive to Achieve Coherence**

Many papers suffer from a lack of **coherence** and sense of **direction**. This can be minimized by adhering to the following procedures:

- **Stick to your thesis.** The purpose of the thesis statement is to give your paper a clear objective. Check it periodically to make sure that you haven't drifted from it.
- After writing your first draft, read through it again making sure that each passage is relevant, necessary, and in the proper place. You want to avoid jumping around from point to point. Group all of the related material together. This not only adds to the coherence, it allows you to make your point more effectively.

## **One Final Note**

It is not easy to write a paper satisfying all these criteria. But with care and effort you'll get closer and closer, and at the same time you'll be clarifying your own ideas and greatly improving your intellectual and communicative skills.

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