

Critical Response Booklet



English Department

Alberta Distance Learning Centre

WRITING THE CRITICAL RESPONSE (CRITICAL ESSAY)

WHAT IS A CRITICAL RESPONSE?

A critical response is a serious essay examining a topic or literary work for its own sake, without reference to personal views, biases, values or beliefs. A critical response does not use first person pronouns. It aims to be objective and neutral in its presentation of ideas and supporting evidence.¹ A critical response does more than explain negative aspects of literature.

WHAT IS EXPECTED IN A CRITICAL ESSAY?

Students are to comment on whether the author communicated his theme effectively through his use of various critical elements (characterization, symbolism, setting, etc.). This essay must present ideas in a well-organized, well-defended, logical and clearly explained manner.

WHAT IS THEME?

Theme is the central idea or writer’s message in a piece of writing. Theme is not a statement of a moral such as, “Don’t talk to strangers”, nor a statement of topic such as “The story is about jealousy in families.” Theme answers the question, “What is the author trying to communicate to the reader about life or the human condition?” An example of a statement of theme is “A careless attitude and greedy nature may result in irreversible damage to the environment.”

WHAT ARE THE CRITICAL ELEMENTS OF LITERATURE?

Critical elements are the techniques authors use to communicate their message. This list provides some possible elements/techniques:

Literary Devices

irony
metaphor
simile
imagery

Elements

characterization
climax
conflict
tone

Techniques

foreshadowing
point of view
setting
symbolism

HOW DO STUDENTS ANALYZE THE CRITICAL ELEMENTS?

While reading literature, students need to be aware of various critical elements that emphasize the writer’s message.

The following generic charts, adapted from Essay Writing for Canadian Students², will apply to any piece of fiction, poetry, drama or non-fiction. Answering the questions from the charts will focus students’ attention on the elements being used by the author.

¹ Richard Davies and Glen Kirkand, Canadian Writer’s Handbook (Toronto: Gage Publishing, 2000), p. 177.

² Kay L. Stewart, Chris Bullock and Marian E. Allen, Essay Writing for Canadian Students (Scarborough: Prentice-Hall, 1994), pp. 462-465.

Categories for Textural Analysis of Fiction¹

| | |
|-------------------------|---|
| Topic | What concept or issue is this work about? |
| Context | In what way is the author's life connected to the story? |
| Setting | What is the place, time, and social environment within which the events occur? |
| Characterization | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What traits define the character(s)? • How are the traits revealed? • Do these traits change in the course of the work? How/why? |
| Structure | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How has the author arranged the events of the plot? (chronological, spatial, flashback, flashforward, etc.) • If the work is divided into parts, do they reflect the development of the act? • Does the action lead toward a climax or turning point? • Is there a resolution of conflicts or a revelation? • Why does the work end as it does? |
| Style | <p>a) Diction - Are the author's word choices formal, informal, colloquial, or a mixture?</p> <p>b) Figurative Language and Allusions - How do figures of speech and allusions enhance meaning? How have objects, gestures or images been given symbolic meanings? What is the effect of conventional, universal and specific symbols? If present, how have patterns of images and symbols (motifs) contributed to meaning?</p> <p>c) Sentence Structure - What do sentence patterns indicate or suggest?</p> |
| Tone | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What is the author's attitude about the story and reader? (admiring, ironic, mocking, condescending, candid, sincere, intense, serious, detached, etc.) |
| Point of View | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • From which point of view is the story told? (first person, omniscient, limited omniscient, objective) • Does the point of view change and what is the resulting effect? • How does the title relate to the work? |
| Theme | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What is the central idea of the novel or short story? |

¹ Kay L. Stewart, Chris Bullock and Marian E. Allen, *Essay Writing for Canadian Students* (Scarborough: Prentice-Hall, 1994), pp. 462-465.

Categories for Textural Analysis of Poetry¹

| | |
|----------------------|--|
| Topic | What concept or issue is this poem about? |
| Context | In what way is the author's life connected to the poem? |
| Setting | What are the place, time, and social environment within the poem? |
| People | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Who is in the poem: various characters, only a persona (speaker), or both persona and characters? • What are the important perceptions, observations, attitudes, or judgments associated with the persona? |
| Structure | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is the poem a particular type (sonnet, limerick, cinquain, haiku, etc.)? • How does the poem use spacing, indentation, or other typographic variations to control the reading? • How does the poem use organizational principles (logic, sequence, events, movement of sensations or feelings, progressive thoughts, etc.)? |
| Style | <p>a) Diction - Are the poet's word choices formal, informal, colloquial, archaic, or a mixture? Has the poet chosen deliberate alterations of usual meanings (poetic license)?</p> <p>b) Figurative Language and Allusions - How do figures of speech and allusions enhance meaning? What symbolic meanings are suggested by objects, gestures or images? What is the effect of conventional, universal and specific symbols? If present, how have patterns of images and symbols (motif) contributed to meaning?</p> <p>c) Sentence/Line Structure - What is the effect of lines or stanzas with or without conventional sentence patterns? How does punctuation or lack of it contribute to meaning?</p> <p>d) Rhythm and Sound - What does the use of devices of sound contribute to the meaning? (Does the poem use regular rhythm pattern or is it free verse? Are rhythm and regular line length combined, e.g. blank verse? Do lines correspond to units of meaning? How are pauses used? Is any rhyme regular or unusual? Does the poem use devices of sound such as alliteration, assonance, dissonance, onomatopoeia, imitative harmony?)</p> |
| Tone | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What is the poet's attitude towards the subject and /or reader? (admiring, ironic, mocking, condescending, candid, sincere, intense, serious, etc.) |
| Point of View | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • From which point of view is the poem presented: first person, omniscient, limited omniscient, objective? • Is the persona closely involved in the events, ideas, sensations, or feelings developed in the poem? • Is the persona sincere, or does the poet have a less evident purpose? How does the title relate to the work? |
| Theme | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What is the central idea of the poem? |

¹ Kay L. Stewart, Chris Bullock and Marian E. Allen, *Essay Writing for Canadian Students* (Scarborough: Prentice-Hall, 1994), pp. 462-465.

Categories for Textural Analysis of Nonfiction¹

| | |
|-------------------------------|---|
| Subject | What issue, concept, event or person is this work about? |
| Context | For what audience and in what situation was the work written? |
| Methods of Development | <p>What pattern of organization is used?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • listing of details • arrangement according to space • arrangement according to time • comparison and contrast • analysis of components • synthesis • cause and effect • enumeration • classification • definition • example/illustration/anecdote • other |
| Structure | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How does the title relate to the work? • How is the support selected and arranged? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – induction – deduction – evaluation – narration – description – deliberate order – other |
| Style | <p>a) Diction - How does the author use language? (scientific, technical, dialect, general, specific, etc.)</p> <p>b) Figurative Language and Allusions - How do these enhance meaning?</p> <p>c) Sentence Structure - What do sentence patterns indicate?</p> |
| Tone | What is the author's attitude about the subject and reader? (admiring, mocking, condescending, candid, sincere, intense, etc.) |
| Thesis | What is the central idea of the work? |

¹ Kay L. Stewart, Chris Bullock and Marian E. Allen, *Essay Writing for Canadian Students* (Scarborough: Prentice-Hall, 1994), pp. 462-465.

Categories for Textural Analysis of Drama¹

| | |
|---------------------------|--|
| Subject | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What issue, concept, event or person is this work about? • Does it belong to a particular kind of drama? |
| Context | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • For what audience and in what situation was it written and/or produced? • Is knowledge of audience and/or social historical and/or cultural situation relevant to the understanding of the play? |
| Setting | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What is the place, time and social environment within which the action takes place? • What do costuming, music, lighting, sets, etc. indicate about setting? |
| Characterization | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What traits define the character(s)? • How are various techniques, including dialogue and acting, used to portray characters? • Do the characters change during the play? |
| Dramatic Structure | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How does the play use spatial and chronological structures? • Does the play begin with a gradual unfolding of the plot or does it begin after the occurrence of some significant event revealed early in the play? • Does the action lead towards a climax and a resolution of conflicts? • Why does the play end as it does? • Is the play divided into acts and scenes? What is significant about these divisions? |
| Style | <p>How does the author/director use language?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) Diction - Does a particular character use formal, educated speech; informal, everyday speech; or the colloquial speech of a specific group? Do any of the characters use distinctive vocabulary (for example, the vocabulary of salesmanship in <i>Death of a Salesman</i>)? b) Figurative Language - Do some figures of speech (metaphors, personification, etc.) seem significant because of repetition or placement? Are any conventional, universal or contextual symbols used? Do allusions create patterns of meaning? c) Pacing - Is the rhythm of dialogue and action meaningful? |
| Tone | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What attitude (e.g.: serious, romantic, nostalgic, ironic) to subject and audience is evident? • Are shifts in tone significant? |
| Theme | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What is the central point of the work? • What is suggested about mankind or how humans react to or cope with conflict? |

¹ Kay L. Stewart, Chris Bullock and Marian E. Allen, *Essay Writing for Canadian Students* (Scarborough: Prentice-Hall, 1994), pp. 462-465.

WHAT'S THE NEXT STEP AFTER THE TEXTUAL ANALYSIS CHARTS?

Once students have identified the various critical elements in a work of literature, they must decide which elements are most significant and effective in helping readers understand the literature's theme.

- Most critical essays will require students to discuss two or three critical elements.
- Students are not expected to discuss each element from the analysis charts!
- However, discussing only one element may result in an adequate mark if the element has been well explained and well supported.

WHAT IS THE FORMAT FOR A CRITICAL ESSAY?

As with all formal essays, organization is the key! Planning ideas and support before writing the actual essay will result in a better product. The essay must have

- an introduction,
- body paragraphs, and
- a conclusion.

SUGGESTIONS FOR WRITING THE CRITICAL ESSAY:

The following suggestions, adapted from Canadian Writer's Handbook, provide general guidelines for students when writing critical essays.

- **Avoid giving plot summary.** Retelling the story is not necessary.
- **Be specific.** Specific examples show support for an interpretation or opinion.
- **Be accurate.** The writer must be clear about what he is communicating to the reader. Facts from the literature must be accurate.
- **Use the correct term.** Use a dictionary to ensure the correct terms are used. For example, the terms *narrator* and *character* are not interchangeable.
- **Refer to the selection by its correct genre.** Do not call a play a movie or a novel a story, etc.
- **Use relevant literary terms correctly.** If analyzing poetry, for example, know the difference between metaphor and simile and use the correct term.
- **Use some quotations.** Using three to five key quotations illustrates that the student has prepared the essay, read the text closely, and understood what is important. Embedding the quote within the writer's text illustrates its point well: *The speaker, however, is not so optimistic. He sees that there are "no more clowns... no more children... no more old ladies" left to inspire the poet/artist.*¹

SAMPLE ESSAY FOR STUDENTS:

A sample essay, which analyses the film *Casablanca*, follows on the next page. Students are advised to give close attention to the organization and support of ideas in this sample essay because it illustrates the expectations of a critical essay.

¹ Adapted from Anthony C. Winkler and Jo Ray McCuen, Rhetoric Made Plain (Don Mills: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1987), p. 298.

Romance And Realism in *Casablanca*¹

Introductory Paragraph Since its release in 1942, the movie *Casablanca*, directed by Michael Curtiz, has become a classic. Even people who have never seen the film recognize the theme song, “As Time Goes By”, and the line “Play it again, Sam”, even though this line never actually occurs in the film. *Casablanca* has remained popular undoubtedly due to the appeal of its two stars, Humphrey Bogart and Ingrid Bergman, and talented supporting actors such as Claude Rains, Sidney Greenstreet, and Peter Lorre. **Its main appeal, however, is the mixture of romance and realism in its plot, setting, and characterization.**

Thesis → **The obvious romanticism of the plot tends to obscure its realistic elements.** After a few shots of a spinning globe and

Transition → **Paragraph 1** *Casablanca* street scenes, viewers are introduced to Rick Blaine (Humphrey Bogart), a mysterious American expatriate who owns the Café Americain, meeting place of *Casablanca*’s smart set, and who appears to care for nothing and nobody. Into Rick’s café walk Victor Laszlo (Paul

Topic Sentence → *Henreid*), a famous Resistance leader, and *Ilsa Lund* (Ingrid Bergman), his wife, in search of stolen letters of transit that would guarantee them safe passage from *Casablanca* to Lisbon and America. In a flashback viewers learn that just before the Nazis occupied Paris, Rick and *Ilsa* met there and fell in love. Because of their agreement not to speak of their pasts, however, *Ilsa* does not tell Rick of her marriage to *Laszlo*, whom she believes to have died in a concentration camp. On the day that the two are to leave Paris together, *Ilsa* discovers Victor is still alive and, without explanation, sends Rick a note saying she still loves him but can never see him again.

Rick and Ilsa’s past, then, is a romantic tale of love and self-sacrifice. When they meet and fall in love again in

Body Paragraph 2 *Casablanca*, they must confront more realistic problems: Rick’s cynicism, a product of his sense of betrayal; *Ilsa*’s love, respect and admiration for Victor; Victor’s own sense of honour; and the very real threat posed to them all by the Nazis’ determination to prevent Victor’s escape.

Topic Sentence → Transition → The reality of this threat is emphasized by the director’s use of the setting. On the one hand, *Casablanca* is a romantic city. In sun-baked its streets, merchants in fezzes haggle with prospective buyers; inside Rick’s Café Americain, the scene of much of the action, the wealthy gamble. On the other hand, *Casablanca*, governed by French authorities subservient

to German “advisers”, is the major point of escape for refugees from Nazi-occupied Europe. Consequently, the marketplace turns into a place of terror when a member of the Free French underground is shot by French police in front of the law courts bearing the motto “Liberty, Equality, Fraternity”. Similarly, the glamour of Rick’s café is offset by the plight of the refugees who frequent it and by the ease with which the Germans order the place closed. The setting thus emphasizes the film’s mixture of romance and realism.

Body Paragraph 3 → **The film’s appeal is not just the romantic hope that the good guys will eventually defeat the Nazis; rather, it is the film’s recognition of the struggle that goes on within characters who, while basically good, may make wrong choices.** This issue arises for several of the

Sentence → Transition → minor characters, but it is most fully explored in the relationship between Rick and *Ilsa*. Although Rick’s past (running guns to Ethiopia, fighting in the Spanish Civil War) suggests that he is capable of idealism, his refusal to shield the man who stole the letters of credit raises the possibility that he will refuse to help *Laszlo* and *Ilsa*. Similarly, *Ilsa*’s shift from threatening to shoot Rick for the letters of transit one minute to planning to go away with him the next, makes us wonder whether she will again be capable of sacrificing her love for Rick to her duty to her husband. To emphasize these inner struggles, scenes between Rick and *Ilsa* are often shot in half-light, juxtaposing light and shadow that is a trademark of the film. Because most people are faced with difficult moral choices, viewers identify more fully with characters who face similar struggles than with those who never question their own motives or behaviour.

Concluding Paragraph → In the end, the romantic ethic of love and self-sacrifice triumphs as Rick puts *Ilsa* and Victor on the plane for Lisbon and, with Captain Renaud, strides off into the fog to join the resistance fighters. In its use of plot, setting and characterization, the film reminds us that such triumphs arise out of struggles against opposition, both without and within. This realistic recognition of the difficulty of living up to one’s best self gives the film its continuing appeal.

¹ Kay L. Stewart, Chris Bullock and Marian E. Allen, *Essay Writing for Canadian Students* (Scarborough: Prentice-Hall, 1994, pp. 8-9).

