

Common Topics for Literary and Cultural Analysis:

What kinds of topics are good ones? The best topics are ones that originate out of your own reading of a work of literature. Here are some common approaches to consider:

- A discussion of a work's characters. Are they realistic, symbolic, historically-based?
- A comparison / contrast of the choices different authors or characters make in a work.
- A reading of a work based on an outside philosophical perspective
- A study of the sources or historical events that occasioned a particular work
- An analysis of a specific image occurring in several works
- a "deconstruction" of a particular work
- A reading from an established political or intellectual perspective
- a study of the social, political, or economic context in which a work written - how does the context influence the work?

The Practice of Critical Writing

Thesis - the statement of your argument

- A thesis is never a question.
- A thesis is never a list.
- A thesis should never be vague, combative or confrontational.
- An effective thesis has a definable, arguable claim.
- A thesis should be as clear and specific as possible.

Close Reading - is the heart and soul of all academic writing in the humanities. Without close reading, our arguments would have neither evidence nor persuasive argument. When you close read, you observe facts and details about the text. Your aim may be to notice all striking features of the text, including rhetorical features, structural elements and cultural references or your aim may be to notice only selected features of the text - for instance, oppositions and correspondences, or particular historical references. Interpreting your observations is crucial in close reading.

How to Close Read:

1. Read with a pen in hand, and annotate the text.
2. Look for patterns in the things you've noticed about the text - repetitions, contradictions, similarities.
3. Ask questions about the patterns you've noticed - especially how and why.

Some Templates for Beginners:

Template Option 1

I am analyzing _____ A _____ in order to argue _____ B _____.
An important element of _____ B _____ is _____ C _____. _____ C _____
is significant because _____.

Template Option 2

I am analyzing _____ A _____ in order to argue _____ B _____. In
order to complicate our understanding of _____ B _____, I will now discuss
_____ C _____. _____ C _____ complicates our understanding of _____ B _____ in the
following ways: _____ X _____, _____ Y _____, _____ Z _____.

Warrants - are statements that connect claims to evidence or reasons. Warrants are crucial in making critical arguments. Many writers assume that the link between their evidence and their claims is clear. All too often, this is far from the case. Analyzing our warrants provides one useful way of making sure our argumentative logic is sound. **Logic** is especially important in critical writing.

Counterarguments - One way to strengthen your argument and show that you have a deep understanding of the issue you are discussing is to anticipate and address counterarguments or objections. You can generate counterarguments by asking yourself what someone who disagrees with you might say about each of the points you've made or about your position as a whole. Present each argument fairly and objectively. Every argument has a counterargument.

Using Logic to Strengthen Your Critical Argument: Understanding and Avoiding Fallacies:

logical fallacies - are useful to think about when making arguments. Fallacies are defects that weaken arguments. By learning to look for them in your own and others' writing, you can strengthen your ability to evaluate the arguments you make, read and hear. Fallacious arguments are very, very common and can be quite persuasive. It is sometimes hard to evaluate whether an argument is fallacious. The goal is to look critically at your own arguments and move them away from the "weak" and toward the "strong" end of the continuum.

Here are a few of the most common fallacies that show up in student papers:

1. **Hasty generalization** - Making assumptions about a whole group or range of cases based on a sample that is inadequate (usually because it is atypical or just too small). Stereotypes about people are a common example of the principle underlying hasty generalization. Ask yourself what kind of "sample" you are using. Are you relying on the opinions or experiences of just a few people, or your own experience in just a few situations? Consider whether you need more evidence, or perhaps a less sweeping conclusion.
2. **Slippery slope** - The arguer claims that a sort of chain reaction, usually ending in some dire consequence, will take place, but there's really not enough evidence for that assumption. The arguer asserts that if we take even one step onto the "slippery slope," we will end up sliding all the way to the bottom; he or she assumes we can't stop halfway down the hill. Slippery slope can be a tricky fallacy to identify, since sometimes a chain of events really can be predicted to follow from a certain action. Check your argument for chains of consequences, where you say "if A, then B, and if B, then C," and so forth. Make sure these chains are reasonable.
3. **Weak analogy** - Many arguments rely on an analogy between two or more objects, ideas or situations. If the two things that are being compared aren't really alike in the relevant respects, the analogy is a weak one, and the argument that relies on it commits the fallacy of weak analogy. Identify what properties are important to the claim you're making, and see whether the two things you're comparing both share those properties.
4. **Appeal to authority** - Often we add strength to our arguments by referring to respected sources or authorities and explaining their positions on the issues we're discussing. If, however, we try to get readers to agree with us simply by impressing them with a famous name or by appealing to a supposed authority who really isn't much of an expert, we commit the fallacy of appeal to authority. There are two easy ways to avoid committing appeal to authority: first, make sure that the authorities you cite are experts on the subject you're

discussing. Second, try to explain the reasoning or evidence that the authority used to arrive at his or her opinion. That way, your readers have more to go on than a person's reputation. It also helps to choose authorities who are perceived as fairly neutral or reasonable, rather than people who will be perceived as biased.

5. **Ad populum** - The Latin name of this fallacy means "to the people." The arguer takes advantage of the desire most people have to be liked and to fit in with others and uses that desire to try to get the audience to accept his or her argument. One of the most common versions is the bandwagon fallacy, in which the arguer tries to convince the audience to do or believe something because everyone else (supposedly) does. Make sure that you are not recommending that your audience believe your conclusion because everyone else believes it. Keep in mind that the popular opinion is not always the right one!
6. **Ad hominem and tu quoque** - The **ad hominem** ("against the person") and **tu quoque** ("you, too!") fallacies focus our attention on people rather than on arguments or evidence. In both of these arguments, the conclusion is usually "You shouldn't believe So-and-So's argument." The reason for not believing So-and-So is that So-and-So is either a bad person (ad hominem) or a hypocrite (tu quoque). In the ad hominem argument, the arguer attacks his or her opponent instead of the opponent's argument. In the tu quoque argument, the arguer points out that the opponent has actually done something he or she is arguing against, and so the opponent's argument shouldn't be listened to. Be sure to stay focused on your opponents' reasoning, rather than on their personal character.
7. **Appeal to Ignorance** - The arguer basically says, "Look, there is no conclusive evidence on the issue at hand. Therefore, you should accept my conclusion on this issue." Look closely at arguments where you point out a lack of evidence and then draw a conclusion from that lack of evidence.
8. **Straw man** - One way of making our own arguments stronger is to anticipate and respond in advance to the arguments that an opponent might make. In the straw man fallacy, the arguer sets up a wimpy version of the opponent's position and tries to score points by knocking it down. Be charitable to your opponents. State their arguments as strongly, accurately and sympathetically as possible. If you can knock down even the best version of an opponent's argument, then you've really accomplished something.
9. **Red herring** - Partway through an argument, the arguer goes off on a tangent, raising a side issue that distracts the audience from what's really at stake. Often, the arguer never returns to the original issue. Try laying your premises and conclusion out in an outline - like form. How many issues do you see being raised in your argument? Can you explain how each premise supports the conclusion?
10. **False dichotomy** - The arguer sets up the situation so it looks like there are only two choices. The arguer then eliminates one of the choices, so it seems that we are only left with one option: the one the arguer wanted us to pick in the first place. But often there are really many different options, not just two - and if we thought about them all, we might not be so quick to pick the one the arguer recommends! Examine your own arguments: If you're saying that we have to choose between just two options, is that really so? Or are there other alternatives you haven't mentioned? If there are other alternatives, don't just ignore them - explain why they, too, should be ruled out.
11. **Begging the question** - An argument that begs the question asks the reader to simply accept the conclusion without providing real evidence; the argument either relies on a premise that says the same thing as the conclusion or simply ignores an important (but questionable) assumption that the argument rests on. Sometimes people use the phrase "beg the question" as a sort of general criticism of arguments, to mean that an arguer hasn't given very good reasons for a conclusion, but that is not the meaning here. One way to try

to avoid begging the question is to write out your premises and conclusion in a short, outline-like form. See if you notice any gaps, any steps that are required to move from one premise to the next or from the premises to the conclusion. Write down the statements that would fill those gaps. If the statements are controversial and you've just glossed over them, you might be begging the question. Check to see whether any of your premises basically say the same thing as the conclusion (but in other words). If so, you're begging the question.

- 12. Equivocation** - Sliding between two or more different meanings of a single word or phrase that is important to an argument. It is important that you use the main terms of your argument consistently. Identify the most important words and phrases in your argument and ask yourself whether they could have more than one meaning. If they could, be sure you aren't slipping and sliding between those meanings.

The Mechanics of Critical Writing:

When to Use Quotations:

1. Discussing specific arguments or ideas.
2. Giving added emphasis to a particularly authoritative source on your topic.
3. Spicing up your prose.
4. Quoting in order to analyze a writer's specific use of language.

How do I set up and follow up a quotation?

1. Weave those quotations into your text.
2. Provide a context for each quotation.
3. Attribute each quotation to its source.
4. Explain the significance of the quotation.
5. Provide a citation for the quotation.

How much should I quote? As few words as possible. Here are three guidelines for selecting quoted material judiciously:

1. excerpt fragments
2. excerpt those fragments carefully
3. Use block quotations sparingly; within the block quotation, do the following:
 - Set up a block quotation with your own words followed by a colon.
 - Indent the entire paragraph once from the left-hand margin.
 - single space within the block quotation
 - omit quotation marks
 - Follow up a block quotation with your own words.
4. Do not overuse brackets.

Word Choice - So you write a paper that makes perfect sense to you, but it comes back with "awkward" scribbled throughout the margins by the instructor. So how does a sentence get awkward? In a variety of ways including the following:

- Misused idioms e.g. "I sprayed the ants in their private places."
- Unclear pronouns e.g. "Bill Clinton hugged Al Gore, even though he didn't like him very much."
- Jargon e.g. "The dialectical interface between neo-Platonists and antiestablishment Catholics suggests an algorithm for deontological thought."
- Misused words e.g. "Cree Indians were a monotonous culture until French and British settlers arrived."

- Garbled syntax e.g. “As a woman, he liked her.”
- Loaded language e.g. “Huck Finn suggests that to recover democratic ideals, one must leave civilized society.”
- Colloquialisms e.g. “Moulin Rouge sucked because the singing was way off.”

Questions to Ask Yourself:

1. What word trouble do I usually have on other papers? Are there examples of that trouble here?
2. If I had to explain this point to someone out loud, would I use these words? What words would I use?
3. What’s the easiest way to write these sentences?
4. Am I positive this word means what I think it means?
5. Have I found the best word, or have I just settled for the most obvious, or the easiest, one?

Parallel Structure - means using the same pattern of words to show that two or more ideas have the same level of importance. This can happen at the word, phrase, or clause level. The usual way to join parallel structures is with the use of coordinating conjunctions such as “and” or “or”.

1. Words and Phrases with the -ing form (gerund) of words
2. Do not mix forms.
3. Clauses - a parallel structure that begins with clauses must keep on with clauses. Changing to another pattern or changing the voice of the verb will break the parallelism.
4. Lists after a colon - be sure to keep all the elements in a list in the same form

Essay Template

Essay Working Title: _____

Observations (What interests you or strikes you as worth talking about)

Claim 1 (A concise statement of your interpretation. Someone must be able to disagree with this claim for it to be argumentative).

Evidence 1 (Usually a quotation or other element from a text)

Warrant 1 (A clear and logical statement of how and why your evidence supports your claim. If you can’t supply this, you are making up reality.)

Close Reading (Notes for extended, methodical interpretations of textual elements. Supporting logic, relevant counterarguments, explanation of text’s key terms / ideas, etc.)

Claim 2

Evidence 2

Warrant 2

Close Reading

Significance (The big picture. Must answer the “So What” question. This is usually an abstract rather than a literal statement)

Personal Reactions (Your own rants and raves, feelings and judgments.)