

**Writing a Critical Essay:
Is there an APP for that?**



Writing a Critical Essay

What is a Critical Essay?

- A Critical Essay is a formal piece of writing.
- It is a structured response to a particular question on a text.
- You should use it to demonstrate your **understanding** of the whole text as well as your ability to **analyse** and **evaluate** relevant aspects of it.

What are Understanding, Analysis and Evaluation?

- These are the keys to doing well in a Critical Essay.
- **Understanding**



You show **understanding** when you make clear you know what is happening in the text; you know the story, you understand and can explain the message the writer is trying to convey etc.

- **Analysis**



Analysis is going deeper. This is when you show that you understand not only what the writer is saying, but also **how** it is said. You should aim to **analyse** and **explain** how and why the writer uses techniques (language, characters, setting, plot etc) to convey their message.

- **Evaluation**



Evaluation is all about you. Explain clearly how successful you think the writer has been in using particular techniques, in achieving their purpose, in engaging you etc.

Evaluation can only work if you explain and justify your opinion.

Structuring your Essay



An Essay Plan for a Generic Book Review

Paragraph 1: Introduction

- Introduce the text and author.
- Make a personal comment on the text and its message/central concerns.
- Refer to the question.
- Briefly explain what the essay will do.

Paragraph 2: Brief Summary

- Briefly summarise what happens in your text.
- Make sure you keep it to **one** short paragraph.
- This is the only part of your essay you're allowed to tell the story... so get it out of your system!

Paragraphs 3-7/8: Main Points

- You should have approximately 4-6 main points which will help you to answer the question.
- Each of these main points will focus on one of the following(it depends on the question):
 - A character
 - A relationship
 - A setting
 - The plot
 - A key event/key scene
 - A particular stanza (poetry)
 - A particular language feature
 - An important theme

Final Paragraph: Conclusion

- Use this to round up your points – briefly summarise what you have said.
- Refer to the question and try to show how you have answered it.
- Give your overall opinion of the text and the writer's message.

An Essay Plan for a Review of a text that analyses a specific technique

Paragraph 1: Introduction

- Introduce the text and author.
- Make a personal comment on the text and its message/central concerns.
- Refer to the question.
- Briefly explain what the essay will do.

Paragraph 2: Brief Summary

- Briefly summarise what happens in your text.
- Make sure you keep it to **one** short paragraph.
- This is the only part of your essay you're allowed to tell the story... so get it out of your system!

Paragraphs 3-7/8: Main Points

- You should have approximately 4-6 main points which will help you to answer the question.
- Each of these main points will focus on what the question asks you to analyse.
 - For example if the question is about character then your points should all be about your chosen character and how they are created and developed over the course of the novel.
 - If the essay is about a main theme then you should look at how the theme is shown and developed through the use of characters, setting, plot, symbolism etc
 - If it is a poetry essay then choose the most important/ interesting images and uses of language to analyse. **Do not** go through the poem technique by technique.

Final Paragraph: Conclusion

- Use this to round up your points – briefly summarise what you have said.
- Refer to the question and try to show how you have answered it.
- Give your overall opinion of the text and the writer's message.

An Essay Plan for a Comparative Review

If you're asked to compare more than one text, you should structure your essay in a similar way. Avoid writing about one text and then the other, it's much better to deal with both throughout the essay. This will help to ensure you COMPARE.

Eg, you may structure a comparative book report like this:

Para 1: Introduction

Para 2: Brief summaries

Para3/4: Characterisation (for example) – Text 1 and 2. End with a few sentences comparing in detail how effective this was in each text. Justify your response.

Para5/6: Setting (for example) – Text 1 and 2. Again, end by comparing them.

Para7/8: Climax (for example) – Text 1 and 2. Finish with comparison.

Para 9: Conclusion – overall comparison.

Point Structure

In order to make sure that you demonstrate **understanding, analysis** and **evaluation**, you can structure your points in the following way:

S.E.A.L.



STATEMENT – this is your topic sentence. Use it to make your point. Introduce the important character/setting/scene and say why it is important.

EXAMPLE – quote a specific example or examples. You should give a quote as evidence in **every** genre.

ANALYSIS – analyse your example. Explain clearly and in detail what your example proves. Think about why you chose it and how the writer’s message is made clear.

LINK – link back to the **question** and the writer’s **central concerns**. Explain how you have used this point to answer the question. Make sure you give your opinion on how well the writer has conveyed his/her message through the character/language/scene you have focused on.

Structuring your Essay: Some Extra Support



Paragraph 1: Intro

_____ by _____ is a _____ which deals with the theme of _____. I found it _____ because of the way the writer _____.

(Add in a sentence or two in which you will refer to the question. The briefly say what you will refer to in order to answer the question. Ask your teacher for help with this if you're not sure what to write).

Paragraph 2: Brief Summary

_____ is about _____.
_____. The main character(s) _____.
_____. The setting _____.
_____. The climax of the story is when _____.
_____. The most best thing about the story is _____.
_____.

Main Points (some examples):

Remember, at the end of each main point, you should refer back to the question. Ask your teacher for help if you're not sure how to do this.

Characterisation:

The main character is _____. He/she is a _____ character. Evidence of this is when the writer tells us _____ *quote* _____. Another interesting thing about this character is _____. I know this because _____. The writer makes the character like this in order to help convey the message that _____. I think the writer wanted me to think _____ about this character. I found this him/her _____ because _____.

Setting:

The setting of the story is _____. The writer makes this clear by _____. A particularly interesting description of setting is _____. This is a _____ description because of the way it _____. The setting is important to the text because _____. I think the writer chose to set the book in this particular time and place because _____. I found the setting _____ because _____.

Key incident/scene:

A turning point in the text is when _____. *quote* This happens in Chapter/Act _____. When this happened, I felt _____ because _____. The reason this is such an important scene/incident is _____. After this happens _____ changes/develops. As a result of this scene _____. I think the writer wanted to show _____ by including this turning point.

Final Paragraph: Conclusion

Overall, _____ is _____ because _____. The main message the writer wanted to convey was _____. He/she was successful/unsuccessful in doing so because _____.

(Add in a sentence referring back to the question – ask your teacher if you need help).

Quotation



- Quotation is the most important way of giving specific evidence to back up your points. Aim to have at least one quotation per point.
- A quotation **does not** have to be something a character says. It is just something you have copied/quoted from a text.
- Don't just throw quotations in, you need to introduce them and explain their context.
- Copy the quotation **exactly** from the text. If your text is poetry or drama, take a new line when the writer does.
- ALWAYS put quotations in inverted commas.
- If your quotation is only one line long, there is no need to take a new line.
Eg

It is clear that Joe and his class are bored by their teacher's attempts to inspire them. McCabe shows this in the words: "So we all sat there and yawned till the music was finished" (p23) This clearly portrays how bored Joe was because...

- If it is two lines or more, take a new line and indent. Then restart the analysis on the next new line.
Eg

Shakespeare makes us laugh at the witty exchanges between Beatrice and Benedick. One that is particularly amusing is the fast paced discussion at the masquerade ball when Beatrice pretends not to know she is dancing with Benedick:

Beatrice: Nor will you not tell me who you are?

Benedick: Not now.

Beatrice: That I was disdainful, and that I had my good wit out of the 'Hundred Merry Tales' – well, this was Signior Benedick that said so." (2:1:115-119)

Here Shakespeare shows the audience how the two main characters will ...

- After your quotation, write the following in brackets:
 - **Prose** – page number. EG (p25)
 - **Poetry** – line numbers. EG (12-15)
 - **Drama** – act, scene and line numbers. EG (1:II:34-5)

Critical Essay Toolkit: Some General Tips



- Your writing should be formal and as correct as you can make it. Spelling, punctuation, grammar and paragraphing matter!
- Always write the title of the text in inverted commas.
- When referring to the writer, either use his/her **surname** or **both names**, eg Shakespeare or William Shakespeare. **Never** call him William!!
- It is ok to use the first person when giving your opinion. Evaluation is all about you, so bring yourself into it.
- **Do not assert** – never make a point you cannot back up with evidence from the text. If you say a character is weak, you must give examples of this weakness and explain why the writer makes him/her like this – how does it help convey the message? Always remember to explain your analysis in detail. **E.g.** *This shows the theme of love **because*** Rather than writing: *This shows the theme of love.*
- It is really important that you use your understanding of the text to answer the question. Don't just write down everything you know about the text. Keep it focused. **Be relevant.** Each of your main points should be chosen to help you to do this.
- Try to link your points. You can do this in the topic sentences (**statements**) – eg:
 - One way in which Shakespeare helps me to understand the theme of love in “A Midsummer Night’s Dream” is in the relationship he creates between Hermia and Lysander.
 - Another tool Shakespeare uses to develop the theme of love is...
- Making a paragraph plan before writing will help.

Bringing it all together: a couple of sample points



Text: “A Midsummer Night’s Dream” by William Shakespeare

Question: Choose a play which encourages you to reflect on the theme of love. Show how the writer develops the theme through his use of characterisation and other dramatic techniques.

STATEMENT: A major way in which Shakespeare encouraged me to reflect on the theme of love in “A Midsummer Night’s Dream” is his development of the relationship between Hermia and Lysander. From the start of the play, it is obvious they will do anything to be together.

EXAMPLE: This is clear when Lysander tells Hermia of his plan and pleads with her to meet him in the woods the next day. Her answer shows just how devoted she is to him:

“I swear to thee by Cupid’s strongest bow,

By his best arrow, with the golden head,

By the simplicity of Venus’ doves” (1:1:169-71)

ANALYSIS: By making Hermia swear on Cupid’s most valuable bow, Shakespeare suggests that her love for Lysander is extremely powerful. In referring to the arrow with the “golden head” he shows that it is also something beautiful. This makes clear how much love has affected Hermia and made me want her to marry Lysander behind her father’s back.

LINK: In establishing the strength of the love between Hermia and Lysander from the start, Shakespeare made me realise that love would be an important theme in the play. It also meant he was successful in creating sympathy for Hermia and made me feel that her father was wrong to stand in the way of her relationship with Lysander.

Text: “The Merchant of Venice” by William Shakespeare

Question: Choose a play which conveys a message about the importance of humanity. Show how the writer helps you to appreciate this message through use of characters, key scenes and other dramatic techniques.

STATEMENT: Shylock is an extremely unpleasant character and is used by Shakespeare to encourage the audience to see the dangers in having no humanity.

EXAMPLE: This lack of humanity is particularly evident when he refuses to give a reason (other than hatred) for insisting upon a pound of Antonio’s flesh:

“So I can give no reason, nor I will not,
More than a lodg’d hate and a certain loathing
I bear Antonio, that I follow thus
A losing suit against him” (4:1:59-62)

ANALYSIS: Shylock responds in this way when asked in court why he is so insistent on gaining his bond. His words make clear how deeply he hates Antonio. The fact that Shakespeare makes him say “I can give no reason” reinforces the fact that there is no logical reason for his behaviour and he is driven purely by hatred. This encourages the audience to despise him due to his lack of humanity.

LINK: The fact that Antonio seems likely to die for this is shocking to the audience and helps Shakespeare convey his message about the terrible consequences such a lack of humanity can have.

Sequencing Points



The way in which you sequence your points will very much depend on the text and the question.

The **most** important thing is to have a logical structure that makes sense to the reader. Try not to jump around the text with no apparent thought as to where you are going next.

Chronologically

For poetry in particular, it is often appropriate to work your way through the text. For prose and drama you may become tempted to tell the story rather than analyse and evaluate it if you are not careful.

Key Scene Questions

If the question asks you to focus on a key scene and analyse its importance to the rest of the text, you should begin with a point on the key scene itself and then move through the different ways it impacts on the text as a whole.

Order of Importance

You may decide to sequence your points in order of importance, with the strongest and most important coming first. Or, you may think it's better to build up to the most important point.