

# Guidelines For Writing Critical Analyses

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In general, the purpose of this paper is to provide a **critical** analysis rather than a report on or purely **descriptive** account of some text, event or issue. This means that you will need to **clarify theoretical issues** and make sure that your **key terms and concepts are properly defined**. You'll also need to **state explicitly** the assumptions and arguments being used to support the various positions taken. Then you'll have to **evaluate** these positions and **support** this 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.

## 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.

## 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 are writing for the **general** reader, not for someone who is familiar with the text.
2. You will 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.

## State Your Case Clearly and Accurately

A. 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 you 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.

B. 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.

## Argue for Your Position

A. **Make it manageable**, i.e. make sure you have the evidence or argument to support the conclusion you are trying to reach.

B. **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.

C. **Choose and use examples wisely**. In order to have a good basis for illustrating a conclusion, one's examples have to be chosen from such a variety of circumstances that they will include all factors which could be relevant to the generalization. Often this will mean choosing examples from different kinds of circumstances.

D. **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.**

### **Define Key Terms**

**A. 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.

**B. 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.

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

**D. 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 one discovers that this is not so, one's 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 these 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 I) know that you have a valid argument leading to it?

### **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:

1. **Stick to your thesis.** The purpose of the thesis statement is to give your paper a clear focus. Check it periodically to make sure that you haven't drifted from it.
2. After writing your first draft, read through it again making sure that each passage is relevant, essential 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**

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

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