

HOW TO WRITE

Book Reviews

AND LITERARY CRITICISM

THE PURPOSE OF THIS GUIDE is to help you write critical essays about books or other literary works. When you write literary criticism, you combine reasoned analysis with your personal evaluation of the work.

Literary analysis and book reviews differ from the standard book reports you were assigned in earlier grades. A book report is a mere summary of a work that describes what happened in a text and when. However, in literary criticism and book reviews, you must bring your own critical skills to bear as you analyze a text. Your instructor will be asking you to evaluate and critique the work, not just summarize it.

One of the exciting things about writing literary criticism is that you can share with others what you have learned and experienced while reading a poem, play, or novel. This personal experience is just that—personal—and is an essential ingredient for effective criticism and reviews. Nevertheless, although your work will reflect your individuality, there are some general approaches and techniques that can assist you in organizing your thoughts and creating your final report. The sections of this guide provide hints and strategies that will save you time and help you create a more thoughtful, well-written document.

How to read texts critically

How to locate and use outside **sources of information** to gain additional perspectives on a literary work

How to **organize and write the report**

How to write reports on nonfiction texts

Literary Criticism

We would like to stress that just because literary criticism sounds critical, you do not have to dislike the work you are analyzing. The word *criticism* refers to the process of thinking critically about and evaluating a text; you are not required to give a negative evaluation of a work. In fact, there is a strong tradition in literary criticism that seeks to identify what is good about a text and to highlight it for the attention of others.

Web sites of interest:

We have identified a number of Web sites that offer information about literary criticism and book reviews.

References for further research

HOW TO READ TEXTS CRITICALLY

WRITING LITERARY criticism involves reading texts with an eye toward evaluating them, as opposed to reading purely for pleasure or to learn facts (as with a textbook). **Reading critically** involves not only pinpointing the theme, or the message, of the book, but also appraising and evaluating the style of the author.

This is not easy; often you must reread a few times before you can make an effective judgment. Fortunately, people have suggested ways to accomplish this. In published guides to literary criticism (*Barnet, 1985; Sullivan, 1983; Gordon, 1973*), authors suggest focusing on some elements that are common to literary analysis when starting your task. Read each of the topics below for examples of how to examine texts critically:

Point of View

Point of view—also known as voice or perspective—refers to the way in which information is presented in a literary text. Who is telling the story, and how does the author's choice of narrator effect the plot? In all works of fiction, authors must make choices about what information to include and what information to leave out. The author often does not reveal everything that occurs to every character. Instead, the reader knows only what the author chooses to reveal through the voice of the narrator.

To consider how this process works, think of important episodes in your life and imagine how external witnesses might describe them. Now, imagine how people who were not present but only heard about the events might describe them. The stories will probably be very different, as they came from people with dissimilar points of view. In a novel, the point of view functions in a similar manner; the way in which information is presented varies depending on which character is speaking.

Literary Criticism

As you read the text, consider the following questions related to point of view:

- **Who is telling the story? How does this effect the story?**
- **How is what we learn in the story limited by the choice of narrator? Does the narrator**
- **know everything that is going on, or only some things?**
- **How would the story be different if the author presented another point of view?**
- **How does the author's choice of perspective contribute to the plot?**
- **Are there multiple points of view? If so, what does each contribute?**
- **Does the narrator provide a reliable account of events? Is he or she trustworthy?**

Plot

Plot refers to the sequence of events in a story. In a well-written piece of fiction, events do not occur randomly. They are arranged according to the author's wishes. The typical plot structure contains elements of the following sequence of events:

exposition, where the author provides needed context and background information

rising action, where the author develops a series of crises

climax of the story, where the crisis is resolved in a certain way, followed by a period of

falling action or **denouement**, where the final elements of the plot are untangled, and the story is concluded

One way to analyze a work of fiction is to uncover the reasons the plot is constructed in a certain way.

As you read the text, consider the following questions related to plot:

- **Why are the events of the story arranged the way they are?**
- **How does the plot structure relate to the overall theme of the story?**
- **What keeps the plot moving? How are the characters motivated or effected by either internal (psychological, spiritual) or external (familial, societal, natural) events?**
- **What is the climax of the story? When does the climax occur?**
- **What happens after the climax, and how is it significant?**
- **What are the crises encountered by the characters? How are they resolved?**
- **Does the plot make sense? Do events occur logically?**

Literary Criticism

Characterization

Characterization refers to the ways in which the author portrays the main participants. The world the author has created could contain literally anyone, yet we encounter only those he or she has chosen for us. The author makes a deliberate choice about whom to include in the story, and also controls what we learn about these characters. Determining what characters are in a story, why they are included, and how their characterization effects the meaning of the plot are other ways to analyze a work of fiction.

As you read the text, consider the following questions related to characterization:

- **What is the main character like? What are the virtues and vices of the character, and how are they revealed?**
- **What is the most important element of the main character's personality?**
- **What conflict does the main character confront? Is the conflict moral, material, or of some other origin? Does the character have any strong beliefs? How does this relate to the theme of the story?**
- **Why does the author choose to present the character in this fashion? How might the story be different with another main character?**
- **What minor characters are included? What are their roles in advancing the story?**
- **Do any of the characters change during the story? How is this change brought about?**

Setting

All stories take place in a particular time and place. In many works, the setting is as important as the characters themselves. In addition to the physical place, you should pay attention to the atmosphere or feel of the setting.

Setting can evoke a particular mood, such as brightness and cheeriness, or drabness and dreariness. The setting can also reveal information about the characters. Paying attention to the environment inhabited by the main characters can be important to understanding the story. The description of the house the character lives in, or the bar he or she hangs out at, can reveal a great deal about the person's lifestyle, habits, and motives.

As you read the text, consider the following questions related to setting:

- **Why did the author choose to set the story in a particular time and location?**
- **What are the unique characteristics of the setting? How might the story be different if set in another location or time period?**
- **How does the setting contribute to the overall theme of the work?**
- **How does the setting impact the developments of the story?**
- **How do the characters react to the environment they are in? Are they happy where they are? Do they seek to change the setting? Are they successful?**
- **Is the setting used as a metaphor or symbol for anything?**

Literary Criticism

Theme

Ultimately, the theme of the story is the most significant aspect of a literary work. The theme is what the work is about. What is the author trying to convey by writing the work? Fictional works are not random creations. The structure of the work, the characters, the plot, and the setting should all relate back to the central theme. The theme will not always be simple or obvious. In some cases, the reader has to infer the author's intentions by connecting various events and statements together to form a unifying image.

As you read the text, consider these questions regarding theme.

- **What is the theme of the work?**
- **Is the theme explicitly stated? If so, where does this occur? If not, what events, actions, or statements reveal the theme?**
- **How do the various elements of the story (settings, plot, etc.) contribute to the theme?**
- **Is there more than one theme of the work? If so, which is the main theme?**

SOURCES OF INFORMATION

ALITERARY CRITICISM is different from a typical research report because your own thoughts and opinions form the basis of your report. In most cases, your instructor will want to hear what you have to say about a particular work being discussed, not what others have written. However, studying other people's criticism can help you analyze difficult texts. Certain works, particularly those written long ago, may contain references to ancient customs, and to events that can be confusing if left unexplained. Furthermore, your knowledge of the aspects of life among other cultural groups or nations—even in contemporary times—may be insufficient to understand the commonplace references in the book. Knowing more about an author and the time period and place he or she lived in can help you to figure out these kinds of references.

For contemporary information about other cultures and nations, and for more help conducting literary research, see our recommended Web sites.

Information About Authors

Fictional stories sometimes reflect elements of the author's real life. Knowing more about authors and events that impacted their lives is therefore likely to provide you with a better understanding of their work. You can find information about authors both **online** and in your local **library**.

Online resource for author information

Internet Public Library: Online Literary Criticism Collection
<http://www.ipl.org/ref/litcrit/>

Library Resources for Author Information

Several print biographical sources will also provide background information about authors' lives and help you identify the forces that may have shaped their perspectives and influenced their writing. You should be able to find these sources in most moderately sized public and academic

Literary Criticism

libraries. Check with your local library for availability and location information. Two particularly useful sources are:

Dictionary of Literary Biography

Each volume focuses on a different topic, e.g., British mystery novelists or American fiction after World War II.

Contemporary Authors

Each volume is arranged alphabetically by the author's name.

Many libraries also have more specialized biographical resources, focusing on particular time periods, countries, or types of writing. See below for a few examples of these biographical resources. Your local librarian can assist you in identifying the right resource for your paper.

American Authors, 1600-1900

European Authors, 1000-1900

Native North American Literature

African American Writers

Modern American Women Writers

Information about Literary Genres and Time Periods

When you read a book, it is often helpful to be able to place the specific work into its literary and historical context. For example, when you read a tragedy, it is useful to know what the common elements of a tragedy are. How is this work similar to, or different from, traditional tragedies? Similarly, you can better understand a play set in Victorian England if you have a basic understanding of the time period. How did people dress, act, and think then? How do the characters in the work you are reading compare to people typical of that time? The sources below can assist you in answering these and many other questions.

Online Resources

Internet Public Library: Online Literary Criticism Collection

<http://www.ipl.org/ref/litcrit/>

Voice of the Shuttle

<http://vos.ucsb.edu/browse-netscape.asp?id=3>

A large listing of links on English Literature, arranged by time period, and type of literature, e.g., Romantic Period, 19th Century, Drama, Poetry, etc.

Yahoo's Literature Listings by Genre

<http://dir.yahoo.com/arts/humanities/literature/genres/>

About.com English Literature page

<http://englishlit.About.com/arts/englishlit/>

Despite the name of the page, the sidebar on this site contains links to many other literary genres, such as Russian, Spanish, and African.

Literary Criticism

Library Resources

Benet's Reader's Encyclopedia

Oxford Companion to American Literature

(as well as volumes for literature of other countries)

You may also want to look at works on specific genres, such as the **Encyclopedia of Poetry**, or the **Encyclopedia of Science Fiction**.

Definitions of Literary Words and Concepts

Do you want to know what *alliteration* means? Does your writing evoke *pathos*? Have you used *malapropisms* in your essay? Check the sources below for definitions of these and other terms used in literature.

You can also find information about literary terms and concepts through resources such as the **Merriam-Webster Dictionary**.

Online Resources

A Glossary of Literary Terms and A Handbook of Rhetorical Devices
<http://www.uky.edu/ArtsSciences/Classics/Harris/rhetform.html>

Library Resources

Benet's Reader's Encyclopedia

Critical Terms for Literary Study

A Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory

A Handbook to Literature

WRITING THE ESSAY

AFTER YOU HAVE READ the novel, short story, or poem and consulted secondary sources, you can begin to write your essay. The structure of an essay is much like that of the term or **research** paper, as are the technical aspects.

General Advice About Writing

Before you begin your analysis, find a comfortable, quiet place to work. When you do begin writing, don't strive too hard for perfection. Initially, concentrate on getting your thoughts onto paper, as you can organize and add stylistic elements to your essay later. You may find it helpful to brainstorm or "freewrite," a technique that involves writing down your ideas as fast as they occur to you without worrying about how they connect to each other.

Leave yourself plenty of time for reflection and revision. For additional advice, see our guide on **Writing a Research Paper**. You might also look at:

Writing the Research Paper

<http://www.english.eku.edu/SERVICES/COMP102/DEFAULT.HTM>

Literary Criticism

Practical Guide to Writing Papers about Literature

<http://www.gmu.edu/departments/writingcenter/handouts/litwrite.html>

Paradigm Online Writing Assistant

www.powa.org

OWL, Purdue University Online Writing Lab

<http://owl.english.purdue.edu/>

A+ Research and Writing, Internet Public Library

<http://www.ipl.org/teen/aplus/>

Constructing a Literary Criticism Paper

Your literary critique is a way of communicating your response to a particular work. Writing about your thoughts and feelings can be more difficult than merely listing facts, as usually there is no “correct” answer. The purpose of your essay is to lead the reader to agree with your conclusions, and you need to present your evidence to show that your point of view is reasonable and supported by the text.

Typically, an essay has three components: a thesis statement, several supporting paragraphs, and a concluding statement. See below for help with constructing each element.

Thesis Statement

Your essay should begin with a thesis statement. A thesis statement is a brief summary of your analysis, and a description of the central ideas you will examine. Simple one-page essays may have just a single-sentence thesis statement, while more complicated papers may require several paragraphs to adequately represent the main ideas.

The goal of your thesis statement is to provide a guide for readers. It should outline what you intend to discuss, and provide a sense of the structure for your paper. A thesis also gives you an opportunity to grab the reader’s attention, and as such, it should be carefully written, clear, concise, and interesting. Make a bold assertion, or ask an intriguing question.

Although the thesis statement introduces the essay, you need not write it first. Do not agonize over writing a perfect thesis statement in your first draft, as you can reword it after you have written the body of the text.

Online Examples of Thesis Statements

Writing a Thesis for a Literature Paper

<http://www.english.uiuc.edu/cws/wworkshop/tips/writtechlitthesis.htm>

Paradigm Online Writing Assistant

<http://www.powa.org/>

Body of Text

In the body of your text, you will explain and expand on your thesis statement, as well as present your evidence for the argument(s) that you are making. In this section of your paper, you should cite quotations from the work, supplemented by your own analysis and insights.

Literary Criticism

The fundamental unit in the body is the paragraph. Each contains the following elements (*Sullivan, 1983, p.18*):

- **A topic sentence**
- **Sentences with concrete detail**
- **Unity which supports your topic**
- **Transitions**
- **A pattern of logical order**

Each paragraph should have a unique idea or focus, expressed in the *topic sentence*. The topic sentence is usually, though not always, your lead sentence, and should forecast what is to come in the rest of the paragraph. Support the topic sentence with *concrete details*. Offer quotes or other examples in support of the topic sentence, and show how such textual evidence relates to and strengthens the argument you made in your thesis statement.

To achieve *unity* in your writing, each sentence in the paragraph should contribute to your overall argument. Do not digress or provide needless details. Provide appropriate *transition sentences* that link paragraphs. Such sentences connect the ideas expressed in one paragraph with those that follow. You should make your transitions clear enough so that the reader can follow along with the progression of your thoughts. Finally, there should be a *logical order* to your essay, and your thoughts should be carefully ordered and arranged. You can organize your essay in any number of ways, but it is important that the progression of your ideas will make sense to the reader.

Concluding Statement

Your *conclusion* is your last chance to make an impression on the reader, and should therefore do more than simply restate the thesis statement. You might try to answer the question “what does this all mean?” Now that you’ve garnered your evidence, and presented your case, so what? What final impressions do you hope to make? Highlight the important elements of your argument, but don’t merely summarize what you’ve already stated. Try to show some broader connection between your argument, the evidence from your primary and secondary sources, and from your own personal experience, and make your conclusions seem relevant and interesting to the reader. For examples of effective concluding statements see *Sullivan (1983)*, *Gordon (1973)*, and *Baugh (1997)*.

Revising and Evaluating Your Writing

Most drafts benefit from a subsequent review and revision. Try not to edit your work immediately after writing the first draft. If at all possible, put your essay aside for a bit, and come back to the work after a period of time and consider it with fresh eyes. If there is time, show your essay to a friend or parent and get their feedback. Often, others can give you perspective on whether you are making your points clearly and effectively. See the resources below for help with evaluating your writing.

Online Sources

Resources for Writers and Writing Instructors

<http://andromeda.rutgers.edu/~jlynch/Writing/links.html>

Paradigm Online Writing Assistant

<http://www.powa.org/>

Literary Criticism

Online Writing Centers

Writer's Workshop, University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign

<http://www.english.uiuc.edu/cws/wworkshop/tips/writtechlitpaper.htm>

Online Writery, University of Missouri

<http://web.missouri.edu/~writery/>

OWL, Online Writing Center, Purdue University

<http://owl.english.purdue.edu/>

Library Sources

The print manuals below provide advice on how to structure and compose your work. Each guide conveys a different style, so be certain to ask your instructor which style is preferred.

The Elements of Style

The Chicago Manual of Style

A Manual for Writers of Term Papers, Theses, and Dissertations

MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers

WRITING REPORTS ON NONFICTION TEXTS

THE TWO MOST common assignments for nonfiction works (history, biography, math textbook, etc.) are the book report and the book review. We will provide a brief set of tips for both types (see also *Green, 1999; Baugh, 1997*).

Book Report

A book report simply summarizes the book's contents, with personal evaluation by the reviewer kept to a minimum. For example, a book report on a biography of U.S. President John F. Kennedy would review the key events in his life as addressed in the biography. The report should present these facts clearly enough so that someone who has not read the book will have a good idea of what is covered.

As you read the book ask yourself the following questions:

- **What is the book about? What is the main subject or focus of the book?**
- **Why was the book written? Does it succeed in explaining, proving, or disproving what it set out to explain, prove, or disprove?**
- **What is the style of the book? Is it easy to read?**
- **What are the highlights of the book?**

These are a few ideas for things to write about. Be sure to check with your instructor for any specific instructions or requirements.

Book Review

A book review is more substantial than a book report. As with literary criticism and term papers, the writer usually argues for a thesis, e.g., that the book's author has an excellent understanding

Literary Criticism

of the hip-hop music scene, but misunderstands the relationship of hip-hop to music history in general.

A book review also requires that you critically examine the author's arguments. In short, you judge the quality of the book.

The process of writing a good review begins from the moment you start reading. As you read the text ask yourself the following critical questions:

- **What is the purpose of the book? Is the author trying to entertain, persuade, or inform the audience?**
- **Are the author's statements based on facts, opinions, or experiences?**
- **Has the author presented information objectively? Are other opinions fairly—or equally—considered?**
- **How well-written is the book? Are the examples clear, and is the text easy to understand?**
- **Finally, the most important questions: Would you recommend this book? Why or why not?**

WEB SITES OF INTEREST

Glossaries of Literary Terms (*see also Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary*)

A Glossary of Literary Terms and A Handbook of Rhetorical Devices
<http://www.uky.edu/ArtsSciences/Classics/Harris/rhetform.html>

Literature and Literary Criticism

Internet Public Library: Online Literary Criticism Collection
<http://www.ipl.org/ref/litcrit/>

Yahoo!'s Literature Links
<http://dir.yahoo.com/arts/humanities/literature/>

About.com English Literature page *contains sections on other world literatures (e.g. African, Spanish, etc.)*
<http://englishlit.about.com/>

Literary Resources: Theory
<http://www.andromeda.rutgers.edu/~jlynch/Lit/theory.html>

Postmodern Theory, Culture Studies, and Hypertext
<http://www.marist.edu/humanities/english/postmod.html>

Literary Criticism
<http://www.chat-tec.com/litcrit.htm>

American Literature Archive
<http://www.en.utexas.edu/amlit/crit.htm>

Literary Criticism

Writing Suggestions

Online Writery, University of Missouri

<http://web.missouri.edu/~writery/>

OWL, Online Writing Center, Purdue University

<http://owl.english.purdue.edu/>

Paradigm Online Writing Assistant

<http://www.powa.org/>

Resources for Writers and Writing Instructors

<http://andromeda.rutgers.edu/~jlynch/Writing/links.html>

Writer's Workshop, University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign

<http://www.english.uiuc.edu/cws/wworkshop>

George Mason University Writing Center

<http://www.gmu.edu/departments/writingcenter/>

A+ Research and Writing, Internet Public Library

<http://www.ipl.org/teen/aplus/linksplanning.htm>

Online Examples of Thesis Statements

Writing a Thesis for a Literature Paper

<http://www.english.uiuc.edu/cws/wworkshop/tips/writtechlitthesis.htm>

Paradigm Online Writing Assistant

<http://www.powa.org/thesfrms.htm>

REFERENCES

Barnet, S. 1985

Short Guide to Writing about Literature
Boston: Little, Brown.

Baugh, L. S. 1997

How to Write Term Papers and Reports
Lincolnwood, IL: VGM Career Horizons.

Gordon, E. J. 1973

Writing About Imaginative Literature
New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich.

Green, G. W., Jr. 1999

How to get Straight A's in School and Have Fun at the Same Time
New York: Tom Doherty.

Marsh, N. 1987

How to Begin Studying English Literature
Basingstoke, UK: Macmillan.

Literary Criticism

Polanyi, M., & Rosch, H. 1975

Meaning

Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

Skapura, R., and Marlowe, J. 1988

Literature: A Students Guide to Research and Writing

Englewood, CO: Libraries Unlimited.

Sullivan, J. N. 1983

Writing Themes About Literature

New York: Norton.