

## Some Guidelines for Writing Critical & Analytical Essays

### I. Argument: Reasoning and Evidence

1. Define and refine the question to which your essay responds. Even when the assignment provides you with queries to orient you in the topic, it's up to you to frame and articulate the question, concerning a plausible point of contention. That question need not be explicitly posed in the form of an interrogatory statement. But there should be no uncertainty in the reader's mind about what the issue is, or what's at stake in it for you. A suitable question is one that has potential to yield an enlarged understanding of the work or the topic under discussion.
2. Respond to the framing question with a well-focused thesis. The thesis is the basic interpretive claim of your essay. It should be neither so facile as to be convincing without further argument, nor so speculative as to elude a cogent defense in the space of your essay. It should be clearly announced at the outset of the paper (usually near the end of the opening paragraph) and supported with adequate reasoning and evidence over the course of the essay.
3. Do not confuse a strong argument with a strident one. A strong argument is one that shows cognizance of the objections it is likely to face; it is frank in acknowledging any ambiguity or equivocality in the evidence. Do not try to carry conviction on the strength of rhetorical vehemence: overstatements are a sure way to damage your credit with the reader. Rather than merely seek to finesse the apparent difficulties in your argument, you should approach them as the occasion to probe its limiting conditions, with an eye to refining your thesis accordingly.
4. When presenting your argument, limit your factual assertions to matters that you can demonstrate on the basis of the evidence that is available to you. Reference to historical facts may sometimes be appropriate for the purpose of clarifying the issues under discussion, but your thesis should not be dependent on any presumed factual claim (historical or scientific) that is open to reasonable contention.
5. When making claims that are based on, or which concern, written texts, support those claims with specific textual references. Be copious in providing textual citations, i.e., references to specific passages in support of each significant claim that you make about the contents of the text under discussion – *even when you are not quoting the text verbatim.*

- Citations may be provided in parentheses following the pertinent statement. You need provide only the page number (or paragraph number, when standard for that source text), along with the author's name or an abbreviated title as appropriate.

### II. Organization: Paragraphs

1. Give a separate paragraph to each significant idea or element in your argument. The direction and movement of your reasoning should be clearly discernible in the passage from one paragraph to the next.
2. Give proper prominence to the main point of each paragraph. As a general rule, each paragraph's primary point should be stated explicitly in either its first or its second sentence. The paragraph's body should then be devoted to explaining, elaborating, or qualifying its main point. (An exception to this general rule is the essay's opening and closing paragraphs; with these, the main point is often best left for the end of the paragraph.)

3. The opening paragraph should present the question or problem to be addressed, and a clear statement of your thesis. Do not strain the reader's patience with a string of banal platitudes or unsubstantiated claims. (In a longer essay, it is sometimes suitable to extend the introduction over two paragraphs, using the first to frame the question, and the second to state your thesis and to point ahead. In that case, the thesis statement should be clearly announced at the start of the second paragraph.)
4. Don't waste your closing paragraph on rote recapitulation or wan platitudes. It's your parting shot: make it a good one.

### III. Stylistics and Syntax: Sentences

1. Be precise. Choose words and locutions with care, taking care to avoid vagueness, ambiguity, or distracting connotations. If you're uncertain about the precise meaning of a word or phrase, look it up – preferably in the Oxford English Dictionary (available online). Don't say 'ideology' when you mean opinion or doctrine or belief; don't say 'dictator' when you mean monarch or tyrant or despot; don't use the much-abused phrase 'beg the question' unless you are certain you know what it means. Avoid jargon and clichés.
2. Be succinct. Take care to avoid ponderous repetition – a leading vice in students' writing. Use shorter words and simpler locutions in preference to longer and fancier ones, except where the latter contribute to greater precision. Don't say 'utilize' when 'use' will do just as well.
3. Be clear with your syntax. Never leave the reader to guess at the intended antecedent for a pronoun, or the subject that goes with a verb. Sentences usually flow most easily when the main verb follows close after its grammatical subject, and when both precede any qualifying phrases or subordinate clauses. Feel free to use other constructions when they better suit your purpose, but take care not to leave the reader confused or perplexed.
4. Be sparing in the use of direct quotations. Use them only when needed to make your point effectively, without taking up disproportionate space or distracting the reader with irrelevant information. When you do quote from the text, it's generally best to quote an entire clause or sentence, so as to avoid the jerky, breathless quality found in book-jacket copy and movie ads. The only good reason to quote isolated words or phrases is when the author's particular choice of words is pertinent to your argument.

### IV. Some Recommended Books on Writing:

1. *Useful Manuals for Academic Writing:*

Williams, Joseph M. *Style: Toward Clarity and Grace* (Chicago: U. of Chicago Press, 1990)

Booth, Wayne C., et al. *The Craft of Research* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003)

2. *Further Guidance & Advice:*

Elbow, Peter. *Writing With Power: Techniques for Mastering the Writing Process* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998)

Klinkenborg, Verlyn. *Several Short Sentences About Writing* (New York: Knopf, 2012)