

Guidelines for Paper Writing

Literary criticism has a simple purpose: to persuade a specific audience to accept claims about a work of literature. For this reason, criticism is *analytical* and *argumentative*. Rather than being an expression of your personal reaction to a text or a description of that text, your critical writing should serve a *social function*: it should affect the way your audience thinks about the text in question. Here are some guidelines to help you produce criticism that is both serious and useful:

1. *Choose a specific audience and tailor your argument to them.*

! They have read the work(s) you're discussing.

! Plot summary will bore and/or insult them.

! Make sure the tone of your paper is appropriate given your audience. Academic prose does not need to be dry, but your tone should not interfere with your ethos or the points you are trying to make.

2. *Give your audience reasons to read your paper.*

! The first paragraph should accomplish this.

! A helpful, directive title can be the place to start to hook your audience. Remember that a good title succinctly indicates the topic and argument of your paper (e.g., "Dalila and Feminism in *Samson Agonistes*"). An accurate title is more helpful than a poetic one.

3. *No Problem, No Point!*

! All good academic writing, whether in the sciences or the arts, answers questions and solves problems. This is what literary criticism does. If your paper doesn't perform this service for your audience, then there is literally no point in their reading it or your writing it.

! A focal question can best express this: "What are the rhetorical connections between Milton's characterization of Comus and Satan?" "What is the role of the Chorus in *Samson Agonistes*?"

4. *Write in clear, simple sentences.*

! Fancy words are not impressive.

! Most ideas can and should be expressed clearly.

! Say precisely what you mean and move on to the next point.

5. *Think of paragraphs as mini-essays.*

! Each paragraph should have: a.) a topic sentence that indicates the controlling idea of the paragraph; b.) several sentences of cogent argumentation that support/elaborate on the controlling idea; c.) some kind of conclusion that emphasizes the main point of the paragraph and provides a transition to the next paragraph.

! Pay attention to paragraph length. Paragraphs should be neither too short nor too long. While short paragraphs aren't wrong (they can be used for emphasis), they generally indicate underdeveloped ideas and problems with organization. Long paragraphs are legitimate; but excessively long paragraphs typically indicate problems with controlling detail. Accordingly, paragraphs are usually at least several sentences long, but generally not more than one page (double spaced, 12 pt. type).

6. *Use quotations sparingly and transcribe them accurately.*

! Do not quote a text to repeat your point.

! Quotations are used to distinguish someone else's word or ideas from your own. Note that certain types of information (facts or common knowledge such as an author's birth date, etc.) do not really require a citation.

! Quote as evidence of a broader point, then *interpret the quotation*. One quotation can be interpreted many different ways depending on its role or function in a larger argument (e.g., think of "To be, or not to be").

! Use block quotations when the passage you are citing is longer than 3 sentences. Only use block quotations when the exact wording is *essential* to your argument.

! Use parenthetical citation for quotations. For citations from poetry, just cite the line number(s) (and book

number(s) if needed): According to Satan, "The mind is its own place, and in it self / Can make a Heaven of Hell, a Hell of Heaven" (ll. 1.254B5). (Note that lines of poetry are separated by a backslash with spaces on either side.)

7. *Make sure your paper has a clear sense of forward progression.*

- ! Your argument should be arranged in some kind of logical order (e.g., most important point to least important, or vice versa).
- ! Your paragraph organization should be so tight that if you moved a paragraph your argument would fall apart.

8. *A conclusion is not simply a summary.*

- ! A conclusion should *briefly* recap the main points of your paper.
- ! More important, a conclusion should tell your audience how you have changed their understanding of the subject.

9. *Perfection in writing is not just desirable; it is essential.*

- ! Careless errors (typos, basic grammatical mistakes, misspellings, etc.) are easily avoidable and reflect poorly on the writer. Read your paper through at least once after you have printed the final copy to check for obvious errors.
- ! Please remember that titles of longer works are italicized or underlined (e.g., *Samson Agonistes*, *Paradise Lost*); titles of shorter works (poems, short stories, etc.) are put in quotation marks (e.g., "How soon hath Time, like an Allegro").
- ! Grammar matters (and not just to English teachers). Make sure your paper follows the rules of standard, edited English. When in doubt, consult a usage manual (*Keys for Writers*, etc.) or use a grammar checker (but be aware of the limitations of the software).

Format: Do not supply a separate title page. In the upper left-hand corner of the first page, supply the following information (single spaced, on separate lines): your name; section (ENGL 5331); my name; date. Double space twice and provide the title (centered, double spaced, without quotes); double space twice again and begin the text. The text should be double spaced, left-justified, with 1 inch margins on all sides. (Block quotations are indented 10 spaces and single spaced.) Choose any appropriate (i.e., readable) font; the type size should be 12 pt. or 10 pt. Put your last name and page numbers (e.g., Cannan / 2) in the upper right-hand corner; suppress the page number on the first page. The bibliography (if required) should appear at the end in a separate, titled page. Please use the *MLA Style Guide* (any edition) for your citations.

NB Your paper should be at least, but not more than, 5 full pages (excluding works cited). You must include (paper clipped) your proposal(s) and at least one rough draft with your final paper.