

Writing Critical Essays

A Practical Guide

Prose Fiction

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and
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To the student

Writing Critical Essays is designed to help you write essays that analyse works of literature. It focuses on the kinds of writing tasks that are commonly set for assignments and tests, and it gives practical help in the form of sample answers and step-by-step guides for writing. The book is not a “bluffer’s guide” that will help you avoid difficult tasks. It is an instructional text that will help you to understand and cope with the tasks you are set.

As well as helping you to develop your writing skills, the book aims to extend your thinking about literary prose fiction texts and ways of reading them. It contains explanations, activities and examples that will improve your understanding of important concepts and techniques. In this way the book will build on the reading and study of literature you have done in class and with other textbooks.

The various chapters deal with a range of topics but require you to read just five texts, all of which are included in the book. In this way you can develop your writing skills using a small number of texts with which you will become very familiar. This means you can work through the process of critical analysis – reading the text, analysing the question, revising literary knowledge, researching the background, close study – and the planning and writing of your essay without increasing your reading load.

How to use the book

The book is divided into two main sections.

Part 1 is a detailed introduction to writing critical essays using modern approaches to texts. It introduces the purposes and main features of a critical essay. It also offers step-by-step demonstrations of essential essay skills, including:

- how to analyse essay questions
- how to decide what revision and research are needed
- how to develop ideas and arguments
- how to plan and structure an essay.

You should work through this part of the book first. Even if you have some experience in essay-writing, you will find there is much to learn from it.

Part 2 contains chapters that teach you how to write about important topics such as alternative readings of a text, elements of narrative and issues such as gender, race and class. These chapters are self-contained and can be studied in any order. Each one contains:

- brief background notes on the topic
- examples of common essay questions on the topic
- example discussions of the topic
- essays or activities that demonstrate how to tackle common questions
- step-by-step guides to help you practise writing on the topic.

Once you have worked through the relevant section, you should be better prepared to tackle assignments or tests on that topic.

The Quickstart Files

 All of the major activities in the book are available as pre-typed Quickstart files. Where you see this logo, you can complete the essay activities without rewriting the pre-written sections. You can access the files on the accompanying CD or via the Internet, depending upon the edition of your book. See page 200 for instructions on how to access the files.

To the teacher

Writing Critical Essays is designed to give students practical assistance with the task of writing analytical essays about literary prose fiction texts.

In writing the book we have tried to go beyond those teaching methods that only “encourage expression.” Our aim is to offer, instead, a clear framework for writing, with elaborated procedures and explicit models. Some teachers may be concerned that this curtails the student’s freedom to discover and experiment with his or her own style. In our experience, however, methods based on “free discovery” and “process” tend to ignore the fact that critical writing – like all writing – is rule governed, with recognisable forms and usages. It is our view that such rules and usages can remain a mystery to students unless explicitly taught.

This is not to deny the value of students experimenting with alternative ways of writing. But we suggest that such experimentation is most successful when it begins from a sound knowledge of existing practices and the pool of techniques available to writers for achieving certain purposes. By making these generally unspoken rules and techniques visible, and teaching them explicitly, we hope to give students the skills they need to develop their critical writing.

The text, therefore, aims to develop specific writing skills through detailed and explicit instruction. Among the strategies used are sample essays by professional critics and students, which serve as models; scaffolded activities that coach the student through important stages of planning and writing; and tailored writing guides devoted to important topics in contemporary literature study.

Written with the busy student in mind, the book assumes minimal reading time. The key examples and activities have all been designed around just five key texts (three short stories, a synopsis and an extract), each of which is included within the book. These texts serve as the “raw material” for essays on topics ranging from narrative structure and multiple reading practices to readings of gender, race and class. The text is thus self-contained. It can be used in the first weeks of a course to establish important skills and understandings, and thereafter as an ongoing reference.

In its approach to the reading and analysis of texts, *Writing Critical Essays* applies contemporary theory and practices. It emphasises the role of reading practices in the production of meaning from text, and examines issues such as gender, class and race readings.

Using the book

The book can be used as both a classroom text and an individual student reference.

Chapters 1–5, which introduce the key features and processes of critical essays, can be worked through in class to ensure that all students have a solid grounding in important skills.

Chapters 6–12, which deal with specific topics such as multiple readings, elements of narrative and narration, and gender, class and race, can be used in the classroom, assigned as individual study topics, or consulted by students as the need arises.

A guide to referencing follows: it can be used for classroom or individual work.

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