

# Writing a Critical Essay

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# 1. Introduction: what is a critical essay?

Imagine your teacher has set an assignment on a novel you have been studying in class. Or perhaps you are due to sit for a test that requires an essay about a short story you have read. How do you react? Many students find these tasks confusing. They may be overwhelmed by questions: How do I get started? What should I put in? What should I leave out? How do I structure my essay?

This book will help you overcome this confusion and develop a more confident approach to writing essay answers. In the chapters that follow you will learn practical skills that you can apply to your assignment and examination tasks. But before you learn these skills, you need to understand what a critical essay is and why essays are given such importance in studies of literature. The first section will help you get clear in your own mind what the task is all about.

## Writing essays: what's it all about?

Many people assume that writing essays about works of literature is a task only done by students. But in fact there is an entire profession built around this activity – a profession called *literary criticism*. To understand the purpose behind writing your essays, you need to have some idea of what this professional activity is about.

Literary criticism is the systematic study of literary works. It is an organised attempt to explore *what literary texts mean, how they achieve their effects and what value they may have*. Professionals who work in the field of criticism may have a variety of jobs: they may be researchers in universities, critics who write for magazines and television, writers, teachers or publishers. Whatever their specific job, these people are all involved in exploring the meanings, the techniques and the values of literary texts. Collectively, they work to produce and share knowledge and opinions about literature – just as scientists work to produce and share knowledge and opinions about the natural world.

Professional criticism attempts to answer questions about literary works and their role in society. Some of these questions are philosophical and theoretical: Does literature teach people anything about the “real world”? Are some books more valuable than others? How do readers make meaning from literary texts? Other questions have a very practical focus: Should the government provide funding to this publisher or that author? Should a particular text be compulsory for study in schools? In dealing with such issues, literary criticism plays a role in public affairs, culture and government.

The business of criticism is carried out through research and discussion. Researchers, writers and critics argue with one another by presenting their views at conferences and in reviews, books and essays. They study what has been written, make an assessment of it, listen to the views of others and then present their own arguments. They also develop rules and theories to guide them, and methods for going about the task. You will learn about these in your studies and in this book.

### **Criticism**

The English words *criticism*, *critic* and *critique* are based on the Greek word *kritikos*, which means “a judge.” The activity of criticism is all about investigating and judging the meanings, the workings and the values of various types of text.

In the essays you write for your teachers, your task is essentially to learn the skills of criticism: to read widely, to make judgements about what you read, to analyse how texts work and to share your findings and opinions through formal presentations such as essays, talks and debates. In doing this, you will learn about the activity of criticism and get to have your own say about what you read.

### **What is a literary text?**

An important topic of debate in literary criticism has been the question, *What makes a piece of writing "literature"?* A traditional view is that literary works have certain qualities that set them apart from "ordinary" writing: qualities such as an "elegant style," a "universal theme" or a "timeless value." In contrast, some more modern theories suggest that certain texts are classified as literature not because of what they *are* but because of the way people read or use them. In this book, "literariness" is treated as partly an effect of reading practices and social usage, and not only as an aspect of writing.

### **The rules of the game**

Any serious form of study and research has rules and conventions, and this is also true of criticism. In the world of criticism, it is conventional for critics to offer well-developed arguments in support of their views. It's not enough to for a critic to merely state her opinion that a new novel is the best book of the year, or that a new movie is an artistic flop: she has to *argue her case*. That means she must give an analysis in which her evidence and assumptions are clearly laid out. This enables readers to see *how* she arrived at her conclusions, and to decide whether or not to accept those conclusions. Effective arguments of this sort rely on sound thinking, clear expression and the use of convincing evidence.

In the essays you write, you will have to show that you are learning the rules and conventions of literary criticism. Your main tasks in an essay will be to offer a clear *judgement or analysis* of the text, and to present *arguments and examples* that make your analysis convincing to the reader.

### **Example: two critical essays**

To see what all this means in practice it can be helpful to watch the professionals at work. Below are extracts from two different essays on the play *Hamlet* by William Shakespeare. Looking at these examples will help you to see the kinds of arguments and methods used by critics in their work.

The first extract takes up a controversial position on the play. As you read it consider these questions:

What is the writer's *judgement or assessment* of the text?

What kind of *argument or evidence* does the writer offer to support this judgement?

William Shakespeare's *Hamlet* is yet another of those great literary works we would all be better off without. Not only has it spawned a vast industry of stage and film productions that drains money, talent and energy from more worthwhile artistic endeavours, but its accepted status as a classic masterpiece has warped the dramatic sensibility of generations of theatre-goers, scholars and critics. The problem with this play is not merely that it has become so popular as to be almost a cliché but that it fails as drama. It does so, I believe, because it fails the basic test of believability. A reader of sound mind simply cannot credit that the events of the play could take place in the universe we know.

The great English critic, F.R. Leavis, argued that the reputation of any literary work should stand or fall on its accuracy in portraying *Life*. I take this to mean that characters in a play should think and act in ways we recognise as credibly human, and that taken as a whole the text should lead us to greater contemplation and understanding of our common humanity. But in the case of *Hamlet*, the action and events of the play are not credible on even a literal level, let alone a philosophical one. The text is filled with characters who act in ways that simply make no sense.

A prime example of this is the scene in which our young Prince Hamlet confronts his mother, the Queen, over her hasty remarriage to her dead husband's brother. Here we see a son filled with righteous indignation and a will to act.

Hamlet: Come, come, sit you down. You shall not budge.  
You go not til I set you up a glass [glass: a mirror]  
Where you may see the inmost part of you.  
Queen: What wilt thou do? Thou wilt not murder me?  
Help, ho!  
Polonius: [hidden behind] What, ho! help!  
Hamlet: [draws his sword] How now? a rat? Dead for a ducat, dead!  
[He makes a pass through the curtain and kills Polonius.]

(III.iv.19–24)

In his rage, Hamlet slays Polonius, the Queen's adviser. And what does she say about this? Nothing. After Hamlet has muttered a callous word or two over the body, their conversation carries on as if nothing untoward has occurred:

Queen: What have I done that thou dar'st wag thy tongue  
In noise so rude against me?

(III.iv.38–39)

Indeed, both parties seem to utterly ignore what has just transpired. But more than this, the act itself seems quite out of step with what we know of Hamlet's character. Can this be the same Prince who elsewhere we meet as a whining ninny whose best plan for exposing the murderous King is to feign madness, in the hope that the culprit will slip up and give himself away? It is this kind of wild oscillation in the behaviour of key characters that undermines the credibility and the moral force of the play ...

Robert Browne

### Activity

To help you think through your reading of the essay, try choosing between the following statements. (You may decide there is more than one answer in some cases.)

1. Browne argues that *Hamlet* is:
  - a. a literary masterpiece.
  - b. a great, though flawed, work of literature.
  - c. a dramatic failure.

2. The main reason Browne gives for his opinion is that:
  - a. the play is still widely performed.
  - b. the play is simply unbelievable.
  - c. the play contains universal truths about life.
3. Browne supports his opinion by:
  - a. providing an example from the play.
  - b. pointing to the play's complex characterisation.
  - c. quoting the critic F.R. Leavis.

You can see in this example that Robert Browne has followed the rules of criticism by offering a clear judgement or analysis and by backing this up with argument and evidence. His judgement of the text is very clear: he thinks it is a poor drama, and rather overrated. He arrives at this view by applying a common rule – that a play should be “true to life.” And he tries to demonstrate *Hamlet's* inadequacy in this regard by referring to a scene which he feels has failed the test of believability. We would expect to find further examples and additional arguments in the remainder of the essay. (Answers: c, b, and a or c.)

The second essay takes a more conventional and positive view of the play. It, too, offers a clear judgement supported by argument and examples.

It is difficult to point to any one thing as the reason for the great success of *Hamlet* as a tragic play. It is, after all, such a wonderfully integrated text, in which the language and action both are powerfully affecting. But a great deal of the credit must surely go to Shakespeare's subtle characterisations, especially his complex and believable presentation of those “mighty opposites” Hamlet and Claudius. In Shakespeare's hands these two characters are endowed with doubts, faults and foibles that force the audience to see them not as stock figures on a familiar dramatic landscape but as human beings, capable of suffering, in Hamlet's words, “the thousand natural shocks / that flesh is heir to” (III.i.62–63). Their humanity is so carefully drawn we cannot help but empathise with them, and this adds immeasurably to the play's success.

Shakespeare's skilful characterisation is most easily seen, of course, in Hamlet himself, due to his centrality in the ongoing action of the play. The key strategy in the building of Hamlet's character is his changeability. He is, by turns, heroic, resolute, charming, but also skulking, vacillating, bitter. Early in the play we meet a Prince who is dashing and decisive, as when he follows the ghost upon the battlements, though his friends try to hold him back:

Marcellus: You shall not go, my lord.  
 Hamlet: Hold off your hands.  
 Horatio: Be ruled. You shall not go.  
 Hamlet: My fate cries out  
 And makes each petty artery in this body  
 As hardy as the Nemean lion's nerve.  
 Still I am called. Unhand me gentlemen.  
 By heaven, I'll make a ghost of him that lets me! [lets: prevents]  
 I say, away. Go on. I'll follow thee.

(I.iv. 79–86)

Later, however, we see a tortured soul so overwhelmed by the events of a few days that he contemplates ending it all:

Hamlet: 'Tis a consummation  
Devoutly to be wished. To die, to sleep – (II.i.63–64)

While some have argued that these “oscillations” in Hamlet’s character are simply too wild to be believable (Browne 10), it seems more reasonable to argue that in the circumstances these swings of mood and decisiveness are in fact the very building blocks of believability. The wooden heroes of Hollywood blockbusters maintain the same stony-faced demeanour through thick and thin; but they are fanciful characters. Real human beings, in contrast, are uncertain and inconstant: brash at one moment, regretful and contrite at another. Shakespeare’s genius lies in not seeking to reconcile these diverse images of Hamlet, but in laying bare his fragmentary and fragmenting character – and in being prepared to present us with tragic heroes of human (not superhuman) proportions.

Claudius, too, is complexly drawn, though often overlooked because of his smaller role. If any character could fairly have been sketched as a two-dimensional rogue it is Claudius, who murdered the King, his brother. Yet even here, the portrait is a rich and subtle one, revealing a man not entirely without charm and scruples ...

Susan Hilton

### Activity

To help you think through your reading of the essay, try choosing between the following statements. (You may decide there is more than one answer in some cases.)

1. Hilton argues that *Hamlet* is:
  - a. a literary masterpiece.
  - b. a great, though flawed, work of literature.
  - c. a dramatic failure.
2. The main reason Hilton gives for her opinion is that:
  - a. the play is still widely performed.
  - b. the play is simply unbelievable.
  - c. the play contains universal truths about life.
3. Hilton supports her opinion by:
  - a. providing an example from the play.
  - b. pointing to the play’s complex characterisation.
  - c. quoting the critic F.R. Leavis.

Like Robert Browne’s essay, this one offers a clear judgement. Unlike Browne, however, Hilton judges *Hamlet* to be one of the great tragedies. She argues that the play achieves its success through convincing and realistic characterisations. She supports this view by arguing that the changing behaviour of the key characters is what we would expect of real people faced with the situations presented in the play.

It is quite common for critics to disagree about the meanings or worth of a particular text. Different essays therefore will offer different perspectives on a work. But it should always be clear what the critic thinks and how he or she has arrived at the assessment. That is certainly the case in these examples.

You should approach your essays with the same objective: to offer a clear “reading” (or interpretation) of the text, and to support your reading with argument and evidence. Your readers will agree with you or not; but they should not be left confused about your position. (Answers: a, c and a or b.)

### What is an argument?

Everyone has heard that a good essay contains a clear argument. But what is an argument? It is basically *a set of statements* which aims to persuade the reader that the essay’s main point is valid or true.

In Robert Browne’s essay, the main point to be proven is his opinion that *Hamlet* is a poor play. The argument is the set of statements he uses to support this point. Browne’s argument could be summarised like this:

- Successful plays are true to life.
- *Hamlet* contains characters and actions that are *not* true to life.
- Therefore *Hamlet* is not a successful play.

In Susan Hilton’s essay, the key point to be proven is her opinion that *Hamlet* is a very good play. Her argument could be summarised like this:

- Successful plays are true to life.
- *Hamlet* contains characters and actions that are *very* true to life.
- Therefore *Hamlet* is a successful play.

Interestingly, these two critics apply the same rule (of believability), but they arrive at different conclusions. This is because each one has different ideas about what is “realistic” or “true to life.”

Browne expects realistic characters to be consistent in their behaviour, and to have “believable” reactions. Hilton expects realistic characters to be complex, even if that means being inconsistent. This shows how different readings of a text can arise from slightly different “starting assumptions,” even if the readers follow the same rules and procedures. You will find that it often pays to investigate the assumptions that inform a reading in order to see how the critic has arrived at his or her conclusion.

#### **True to life?**

The arguments presented in the essays by Robert Browne and Susan Hilton would be questioned by many modern critics. The traditional idea that a good text is “true to life” has been shown to be a fairly unhelpful way of looking at texts. As you can see, these two critics can’t agree on what makes a text “realistic” – even though they both argue that being “true to life” is the test of good literature. In your studies, and in the following chapters of this book, you will learn about other ways of exploring and judging literary texts that go beyond the test of “realism.”

### **Summary: critical essays**

This chapter has developed three key ideas.

- The study of literature is about exploring what texts can mean, how they achieve their effects and what value they may have.
- The goal of a critical essay is to make an analysis and assessment of a text, and to make that assessment clear and convincing to the reader.
- A good essay should contain sound thinking, clear expression and convincing examples.