



## HOW TO WRITE A CRITICAL ANALYSIS” from Writing With Style by John R. Trimble

"A writer's job is sticking his neck out." Sloan Wilson

"The art of writing has for backbone some fierce attachment to an idea." Virginia Woolf

Teacher: This first paragraph reads like a plot summary, David, not a critical analysis. And so does this next one. David, you want to be analyzing.

David: Well, I thought I was analyzing.

Teacher: But you're merely giving the reader the story here.

David: Well, the reader's got to know what happens, doesn't he?

The chances are that you have been in David's shoes yourself. His confusion is typical. He's been hearing the phrase "critical analysis" for years now, but it's still just gobbledygook to him. No one has ever bothered to explain to him precisely what it involves. As far as he can figure, the whole business is circular. How, he wants to know, can you analyze a story without discussing the plot? But if you discuss the plot, it seems you're immediately guilty of "plot summary." It's like Catch-22, he decides.

Actually it isn't, although it may seem that way. An analogy may help dispel some of the fog surrounding the two terms. The difference between a plot summary and a critical analysis is analogous to the difference between (a) an account of the highlights of the Vietnam War and (b) an explanation of how the United States happened to get into it, why we stayed in it, and what its effects have been on us. A plot summary begins with no thesis or point of view; it merely recapitulates the facts. A critical analysis, on the other hand, takes a viewpoint and attempts to prove its validity; its object is to help the reader make better sense of something he is already familiar with.

"Something he is already familiar with" holds the all-important assumption. If you look again at David's comment -- "Well, the reader's got to know what happens, doesn't he?" -- you'll note that he's been operating from a quite different assumption, an assumption of ignorance. From ninth grade onward he was taught: "Never assume that your reader is familiar with your subject." While this may be sound advice to writers of book reports (or term papers), it's fatal to apprentice critics, not to mention their hapless readers. The critic's job is to explain and evaluate -- that is, to bring his reader to a better understanding of his subject. Plainly, he can't do this if he assumes that his reader is completely ignorant.

Knowing what you can and should assume is not enough, however. You'll still slip into plot summarizing if you neglect to formulate an interesting, gutsy thesis. Novelist Sloan Wilson's remark couldn't be more on target: "A writer's job is sticking his neck out." If you don't stick your neck out, your essay won't have a strong thesis, and if it lacks a strong thesis, you'll have nothing to assert; hence, nothing to substantiate. Since nothing can come of nothing, your sole recourse will be to summarize large sections of the plot under the guise of "analyzing" it.

If, on the other hand, you muster the courage and perceptiveness to formulate a strong position on your subject, you're already well on the way toward a genuine critical analysis, since you have obliged yourself to offer the careful argumentation required to make your position convincing. This normally entails ranging back and forth through the plot in pursuit of textual evidence. In the process, of course, you'll find yourself drawing on many details of the plot..., but unlike the mechanical plot summarizer, you will always be using those details to demonstrate a point. In other words, it is their larger significance that always concerns you, not the details for their own sake. They are illustrations of something--a recurring pattern, a character trait, or whatever.

David might interrupt here: "OK, I follow you, but how do I come up with that 'genuinely interesting, gutsy thesis' you talk about? I always have trouble thinking up things to write about."

Answer: As you read, and later as you prepare to write, get in the habit of thinking in terms of how and why questions. These are the questions that a critical analysis usually deals with. They are more intrinsically interesting than what questions because they are interpretive rather than dryly descriptive. But, equally important, they are more likely to stimulate fresh ideas. Here are some examples:

"How is Hamlet like Horatio--and unlike him?"

"Why does Hamlet delay his promised revenge?"

"How does King Claudius win over the enraged Laertes?"

Well-reasoned answers to questions such as these make for exciting reading because they help the reader to see clearly what before he had seen only dimly, if at all. And thinking out answers to such questions makes for exciting writing because it involves discovery.

Another suggestion: Pay close attention to the form of the work. One of the chief goals of critical analysis, said the poet W. H. Auden, is to "throw light on the process of artistic 'Making.'"

If the work is a poem, for example, you might begin by analyzing the rhyme scheme and asking yourself how it reinforces the poem's content, thematic movement, etc. Look, too, at the punctuation for what it may reveal. (You may assume that very little is accidental in a poem). It's also helpful to ponder these three questions:

1. What is the emotional effect of the poem?
2. How does it get its emotional power--that is, how does the poet manage to make us respond the way we do?
3. How does the poem give us a sense of wholeness (i.e., completed emotion or effect)?

If it's a play, begin by paying close attention to the opening scene, which usually strikes many of the major themes. Also, analyze each scene in relation to the scenes immediately preceding and following it. Adjacent scenes frequently point up ironies, significant contrasts, and the like. Further, be alert to repeated words and phrases, stage directions, and characters' names (often symbolic or ironic).

If it's a novel start by analyzing it in terms of beginning, middle, and end, to get a clearer sense of its movement. Ask yourself what each chapter accomplished. Read closely the initial description of the various characters for clues to their essence, and be alert to verbal signatures in their speeches. Look for repeated words and images. Ponder especially well the final paragraph: what kind of concluding statement does it make?

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One other question concerns tenses. In analyzing works of literature and film, novice writers often employ the past tense. Experienced critics, however, almost invariably use the present tense. This is partly because of the force of convention and partly because dramatic characters are considered as "alive" now as when they were first conceived. Thus, say "Hamlet is," not "Hamlet was." The convention usually applies to authors, too: say "Keats observes," not "Keats observed." Here are two exceptions to the rule, though: (1) If you wish to refer to something that occurred earlier than the time span covered by the play or novel use the past tense. Examples: "Hamlet and Horatio were school chums at Wittenberg." "Reared in the aristocratic home of General Gabler, Hedda was taught to value propriety at all costs." (2) If you wish to refer to something that has occurred before the thing you are now discussing but still within the time span of the work, use the present perfect tense. Example: "Although Hamlet has declared his readiness to avenge his father's murder, he seems here to betray a strong repugnance to the deed."

In closing, it might be helpful if I take the major points of this chapter and recast them in the form of working assumptions for you :

1. Assume that your basic audience is a well-informed reader, not the ignorant world.
2. Assume that since your reader is already familiar with the text you are discussing, he will be bored with commonplace perceptions - as you yourself would be - and will feel insulted if you retell him the plot.

3. Assume that he prefers reading arguments to mere chat and that he won't really begin reading with interest until he sees you courageously crawling out on an interpretative limb-like this: "Love Story will not be the first disgraceful movie that has laid waste the emotions of a vast audience, though it may be one of the most ineptly made of all the lump-and-phlegm hits."