

# CHAPTER 24

# CRITICAL OR EVALUATIVE ESSAYS

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Although we might think of the phrase *being critical* to mean pointing out problems with something or attacking someone or that person's ideas, that is not necessarily the goal of critical or evaluative writing. Even though writing that evaluates a concept, idea, or argument analyzes the line of reasoning, evidence, or conclusions another author has presented, that evaluation might, in fact, find that the author's argument is strong and that the facts and evidence are well presented. Writing that is considered *critical* might not negatively criticize something at all—instead, it takes a careful, analytical look at the ideas being presented. The ultimate goal of critical and evaluative writing is to evaluate, analyze, assess, and appraise.

Evaluation is actually a common part of our everyday lives. We are all familiar with the movie reviews found in newspapers and magazines—many people use them to decide if a movie is worth seeing. When we see a movie, we might talk about whether or not we liked the story line, how good (or bad) the actors were, and maybe even how the setting or dialogue had an effect on us. We may agree or disagree with the person who wrote the movie review. A book review or restaurant critique is very similar.

Another example of where evaluation takes place is at work. Managers often evaluate how well employees are doing their jobs, assessing whether they come to work on time, whether they are able to work

independently or need direct supervision, and whether their work is accurate, timely, and well done. That assessment will be important when it comes to improving the company itself as well as providing employees with the guidance they need to be more successful.

Newspaper and journal articles are often evaluative as well. For example, an article may assess a particular government program such as the No Child Left Behind Act, or the recent “bail-out” programs providing emergency funds to major investment firms. By reading these articles that evaluate the effectiveness of these programs, you not only become more informed about the subject itself, but your decisions regarding who or what to vote for in upcoming elections might be swayed as well. The more critical information you can gather on a subject the better informed you will be to make important decisions. Furthermore, assessments like these have the potential to help governing bodies determine whether such programs need to be continued, revised, or completely halted. In other words, critical or evaluative thinking and writing is very beneficial to everyone.

## **WHAT ARE THE MOST COMMON TYPES OF CRITICAL ESSAYS?**

One of the most common types of critical essays students might be asked to write is the essay that assesses an article or book that someone else has published. For example, an essay might critically assess or evaluate the conclusions of a famous author made in a book that argues how the recent economic crisis in America was caused by a combination of excessive consumer spending and lax requirements for money lending. The critical essay would identify the author’s thesis or argument, analyze the line of reasoning, assess whether the evidence and information presented justify the author’s conclusion, and explore whether the author’s argument is logical and reasonable. The essay might analyze gaps in reasoning, explore contradictory evidence that questions the author’s conclusions, and assess whether the writer’s research is strong and up to date.

Another type of critical or evaluative essay students might be asked to write is one in which they assess the main point, theme, or argument in an original work of literature after reading a novel or poem. Students would carefully analyze the meaning of the work and how that meaning is conveyed. The essay would identify the author’s theme or main idea and explore how the author conveys his or her ideas through writing style, images, metaphors, and other literary devices.

## **IS A CRITICAL ESSAY JUST A STATEMENT OF MY OPINION?**

Although all critical or evaluative writing begins with your responses to the idea, argument, or piece of writing you are analyzing, you should be very careful not to confuse opinion and argument. When you evaluate an idea, argument, or piece of writing, think about the need to explain and prove that your position is valid. Food critics don’t just say a restaurant is “bad.” Instead, they talk or write about the quality of the food, service, and ambiance of the restaurant. Book reviewers don’t just state “I like this book” and stop there. They objectively analyze the book to support whatever position they are taking. In other words, critical essays are much like persuasive writing—they begin with a position about the subject being evaluated and then defend that thesis with objective analysis and evidence.

## **HOW DO I WRITE A CRITICAL OR EVALUATIVE ESSAY?**

As with any writing exercise, a logical approach is the strongest method for tackling a writing assignment. Although each writer might approach writing a critical essay differently, having a specific plan and following effective guidelines will help most writers to succeed in writing an effective critical essay:

1. Begin by reading the article, book, poem, or essay you are analyzing critically. Read it once. Then read it again, highlight-

ing main ideas, subordinate ideas, and supporting details that the writer uses to defend or clarify ideas. Writing a critique of a movie or restaurant will involve a different process (e.g., visiting the restaurant more than once, sampling the food, looking carefully at the way the restaurant operates), but it will still involve thinking critically and analyzing the issue being addressed.

2. Use prewriting strategies like freewriting and brainstorming to generate ideas about your chosen issue.
3. Establish a main point or position—what is the main point you want to convey to your audience? Making abstract statements like “this is a good book” might not be helpful since the general term, *good*, is a very difficult position to objectively prove. On the other hand, a critical essay that argues that a book about the American economy is poorly researched and does not consider current economic theory, says something far more concrete and is easier to prove.
4. Consider what others have said. Researching what experts in the field have already written about your topic will help you learn more about the issues and help you formulate a stronger argument.
5. Defend your position or argument by using specific information from the original work. Analyze the research, evidence, arguments, and conclusions found in the original work and show how the author’s position is (or is not) valid. What leads you to this conclusion? What specific evidence is weak or outdated? What outside research on the subject has not been considered? What other facts or ideas have not been taken into consideration, and how does this omission affect the quality of the work being analyzed? At the same time, what evidence is strong and well supported? What important issues have been effectively considered and thoroughly analyzed?

## A GENERAL ORGANIZATION PLAN FOR A CRITICAL ESSAY

In general, most critical essays follow a basic summary/analysis or summary/response format emphasizing the actual analysis, critique, or response. One effective way to organize your critical essay is to follow the three steps below.

1. **Summarize.** Begin with a brief but specific summary of the article, book, or creative work being analyzed. Refer to the author and title and the author's main point or idea. Summarize the general line of reasoning of this article, book, or creative work.
2. **Establish a position.** Once the summary is created, establish the point being made about these ideas.
3. **Analyze.** The body paragraphs of the critical essay will analyze the work and make a point about it, rather than simply summarizing what has been read. Provide evidence to support and defend the critique.

## OTHER RECOMMENDATIONS FOR A SUCCESSFUL CRITICAL ESSAY

To help you write a successful critical essay, there are a number of other points to consider. It is useful to review this list as you begin working on your first draft, and then return to this list when you go back to revise your essay.

1. In general, avoid first person. Many restaurant critiques successfully employ first person, for example *I had a horrible experience at The Bountiful Kitchen last week*. However, most academic essays that are critical or evaluative avoid first person and use third person instead. Instead of writing *I think that Tom Brown's argument in his article "Stop the Bailouts" is weak*, write *Tom Brown's argument in his article "Stop the Bailouts" fails to*

*consider the dire consequences that would have occurred had the administration not provided funds to banks and auto companies.*

2. Be objective, analytical, and critical. Avoid basing arguments on opinion or feelings rather than facts, and be sure to support your thoughts carefully with reliable sources.
3. Avoid trying to address every issue raised by the work you are analyzing. It is impossible to analyze every aspect of a novel, article, or even a movie.
4. Cite any source information used. This includes quotations, paraphrased or summarized ideas, and facts taken from any source. Cite all sources with both in-text citations and full citations in a references or works cited page.