

Constructing a Critical Essay

The first thing to note about constructing a critical essay, is that it is not synonymous with doing a "close reading", though the two tasks are similar. The distinction is simply that while a close reading is meant to generate ideas and possible interpretations, a critical essay must utilize those ideas and interpretations to **make an argument about the text as whole**. Any good critical essay should arise out of one or more close readings of particular passages from the text which can then be organized into a coherent argument.

A critical essay usually consists of the following elements, each of which is explained in more detail below:

1. **The Thesis:** a basic statement of the overall argument of the paper, usually contained within the first paragraph and sometimes re-stated later in the paper.
2. **Topic Sentences:** each paragraph should contain a statement of the main idea of that paragraph. Taken together, these topic sentences should lay out the reasoning for the overall thesis of the paper.
3. **Evidence and Illustration:** usually details uncovered in a close reading that lend support to each part of the argument. Every paragraph should contain both reasoning (topic sentences) and evidence or illustration..
4. **Questions or counter-arguments:** used sparingly, and at critical moments in your argument, asking and answering potentially challenging questions can lend credibility to your paper. It lets the reader know that you aren't ignoring obvious complications or contradictions in the text.
5. **Conclusion:** the conclusion brings together the evidence collected and explains how your thesis has evolved through the preceding paragraphs. It should explain the implications of your argument for further thinking about the text or issue.

The Thesis:

- The thesis is **the** single most important element of your paper, so make sure you understand what a good thesis is. A good thesis must make an argument about the text that is **original, complex, and arguable**. That is to say, it cannot be a simple statement of fact, an argument drawn from another source, or an argument that is obvious from a surface reading of a text. It must be complex enough to require further elaboration in the body of the paper.
- For example, the following is **not** a good thesis:
1) "Frederick Douglass's narrative is a heart-wrenching account of the cruelties and hardships of slavery."
--this is a statement of fact, and not one with which anyone is likely to argue.
--the body of such a paper would likely just recount the events in the narrative, which is unnecessary. You can assume that your reader has read and understood the text.
- This is also **not** a good thesis:
2) "Learning to read and write becomes Douglass's way out of slavery and its oppression of the mind."
--this is not an original argument, and is fairly obvious from Douglass's own statements in the text.
- Here's a thesis that might hold up:
3) "Frederick Douglass's pursuit of knowledge and his physical resistance to his overseers arise out of his own notions of 'manhood' and his perception of the psychological sources of the master's power over the slave."
--this thesis is a statement of opinion, and one that might be intelligently argued by another reader (i.e. I might say that Douglass's resistance is driven by cultural or literary definitions of 'manhood' and that there are other more important sources of the masters' power like economics, religious

authority, or access to technology, etc.).

--while perhaps not completely original, it does allow for some original combination of evidence and illustration as well as individual reasoning.

--it requires further elaboration in the body of the paper (see below)

Topic sentences

- If you list your topic sentences in order (this is called a "skeleton outline") they should lay out the reasoning needed to support your thesis. You might try organizing possible topic sentences **before** you start writing.
- For example, here are some possible topic sentences for the "good" thesis (number 3) given above:
 1. "For Douglass, 'manhood' suggests both the ability to control his own body and the ability to communicate his thoughts through speaking and writing."
 2. "Douglass recognizes that in order to have mastery over the body, one must first have mastery over the mind."
 3. "Douglass realizes that once his mind has been set free, he can only suffer all the more acutely unless he can also free himself from the physical oppression."
- Note: there would need to be more topic sentences (and paragraphs) than this in the final paper, but these can serve as examples. Note how each one elaborates on and refers back to the original thesis. They are, in effect, "sub-theses" that are needed in order to fully explain the larger argument.

Evidence and illustration

- To support each topic sentence, you will want to utilize the details uncovered during your close reading: images, metaphors, allusions, the use of language and multiple meanings, interpretations of mood, tone, etc. These may come from a single passage (which has the benefit of unifying the paper into a tight, rich reading) or from several passages (which allows for larger patterns of meaning that run throughout the text).
- Organizing your evidence will require culling out things that don't add to your argument, taking a stance on particular interpretations, and explaining to your reader why you interpret the passage the way that you do. Don't **assume** that the reader agrees with you--convince them!
- I can't provide a full listing of possible evidence and illustrations for the topic sentences above, but here are some suggestions as to where you might look:
 1. Look at both the passages where Douglass learns to read and the passages describing his fight with Covey. What do these passages tell us about his notions of 'manhood'? How does he seem to define it? He seems to be talking about being "human" and being "masculine", and maybe the two ideas are merged? Cite passages for details.
 2. Particularly in the passages about reading and writing, Douglass seems to equate "being a man" (or just a "human"?) with the ability to think, speak, read, and write. When he is later reduced to the state of a "brute", he seems to lose his ability to do these things (cite passage).
 3. We see that after Douglass learns to read and write he experiences the very misery that the master says is the inevitable fate of an educated "nigger" (cite passage). In the scene with Covey, Douglass finds that mental freedom alone is meaningless without physical freedom (cite passage). So in these passages, "being a man" becomes a matter not only of communicating but also physically resisting (cite passage).

- Make sure that in citing passages, you make proper use of quotations and in-text citations. See your assigned grammar and usage handbook for proper format.

Questions or counter-arguments

- While you don't want to waste a lot of time going off on tangents unrelated to your topic, you should be prepared to answer potential questions or challenges to your thesis. Read over your paper with a critical eye, asking yourself if you've covered all the bases. Often, allowing a peer to read over the paper will also help identify these potential problems.
- Once you've identified possible questions or counter-arguments, try to answer them in your paper. You can even include the question and then answer it, to show your reader that you're aware of the alternate possibilities and have thought it out.
- Here are some questions one might ask about our working thesis (see above):
 1. Does Douglass develop his own sense of "manhood" apart from the society around him, or are his ideas, in fact, the ideas that he acquires both from his own (slave) culture, and from white society?
 2. Isn't there a potential conflict between defining "manhood" in terms of "mental freedom" and "physical freedom"? Which should be a slave's priority? Which does Douglass find more important?
 3. Is there anything sexist in Douglass's notion of "manhood"? Are the same means of achieving "humanity" equally open to male and female slaves?
 4. What place do emotional and familial bonds play in Douglass's quest for "manhood"? Are they important to him at all?
- You needn't try to address every possible question or counter-argument--only the ones that seem critical to your paper. Do so sparingly and strategically.

Conclusion

- Your conclusion should remind the reader of what your original thesis was and show how you've proven it. You want to restate it, but in a way that elaborates it with the evidence that you've provided.
- Here's a possible beginning to the conclusion of the hypothesized paper above:

"I have argued that Douglass's discovery of 'the white man's power to enslave the black man' is both a realization of the mental oppression inherent in slavery and a recognition of the physical subjugation that is needed to enforce it. His quest for 'manhood' involves freeing both his mind and his body from captivity, and one cannot happen without the other."

- The conclusion may also suggest why this argument is important to our understanding of the text as a whole, or point out further topics or questions that might now be important to pursue. It should convince the reader that the thesis has been worth pursuing. For example:

"Understanding the interdependence of mental and physical in Douglass's narrative allows us to see the true depth and extent of slavery's effect on the individuals who suffered it. It can also help us to recognize the importance of various forms of 'resistance' that may have been less dramatic than Douglass's fight with Covey, but no less necessary or effective."