At some point in your college career, you will be asked to write a critical analysis (or rhetorical analysis) of a short story, poem, essay or film. Based on my experiences as a tutor in the Writing Center, these assignments cause students a lot of anxiety and frustration. That’s a shame, because once you understand what teachers want when they ask for a “critical analysis,” your job is much easier!

To understand these assignments, it might be best to start with what a critical analysis is not:

• "critical" or "criticism" doesn’t necessarily mean a negative or unfavorable judgment of the work. Your job is to evaluate and analyze the work in detail for its overall effectiveness.

• A critical analysis is not just a summary of the plot and ideas in a work.

Writing too much summary is probably the most common pitfall students struggle with when writing a critical analysis. To understand the difference between summary and analysis, let’s look to a restaurant critic for guidance.

Imagine that you and your friends want to go out for the best pizza in town. You look to the newspaper restaurant critic for guidance and find this review:

Joe’s Authentic Pizza Palace is one of the finest pizzas I have ever tasted. They start with real pizza dough. After stretching and rolling the dough out, they cover it with a red tomato sauce and follow with shredded mozzarella, chopped veggies, pepperoni, sausage and ham. Then they put the pizza in the oven and cook it for 17 minutes. Next, it’s brought to your table for you to eat and enjoy.

Would that be helpful to you in deciding whether to go to Joe’s Authentic Pizza Palace? I don’t think so. This writer is using too much summary, so the “review” sounds more like a dull recital of how the pizza was made rather than an analysis of why this pizza is the best.

To “analyze” the pizza’s quality, a restaurant critic would break a pizza down into its parts and evaluate each component. For example, is the pizza’s crust thick or thin, tasty or bland? What about the sauce? Is it thick and spicy or runny and mild? What about the sausage, the veggies, the cheese and other toppings?

I think you get the picture. When writing your own analysis, remember that you need to write a review, not a recipe!

Your first job is to decide what component(s) you will be analyzing in your essay. There are many to choose from (if your instructor hasn’t specified one for you), including:

• The storyline of a book or film: why did the writer construct the essay or story this way?

• Character Analysis: Who is the main character? How is s/he developed? What is significant about this character in relation to other characters and the work itself? Does the character change or grow during the story?

• Comparison/Conflict: How are two or more characters or works alike and/or different? Is this significant? If so, how?

• Conflict: Is there a primary conflict in this work? What is it? Does it get resolved? How do you know that? Does the resolution reflect the work’s theme? If so, how?
**Writing Center Workshops 2005 – 2006**

We’ve saved the best for last! These final two Writing Center workshops of the 2005-2006 academic year are always MOST POPULAR with students, so don’t miss out!

**Taming the Thesis Statement**

Wednesday, February 22, 2006
12:40 – 2:00 p.m.
Location: TBA

**Citation Savvy – Mastering APA & MLA**

This workshop will be available on videotape in Spring 2006. Contact the Writing Center for more information.

- **Setting:** This includes the physical setting, time period, social environment and how the setting influences other elements in the work.
- **Symbolism:** What are the main symbols in the work? How are they important, especially in relation to the work’s theme? What do they represent? Are they effective?
- **Ideas or Theme:** What theme did the writer choose for this work? How is it developed? How do other elements in the work enhance or develop the theme?
- **Tone:** What tone did the writer choose for this work – happy/angry/thoughtful/repentant? Why did the writer choose that tone? Is it effective? How does it relate to the ideas and theme of the work?
- **Organization:** How is the work organized? Why did the writer choose that structure? Is it effective? Does it support the ideas/arguments well or is the organization a distraction?
- **Specific Problems:** Is there a particular problem addressed in this work? What is it? Is it worked out? How do you know? How does it fit with the work as a whole?
- **Structure of argument:** What argument is your work addressing? What is your writer’s thesis? How does s/he prove it? Is this structure effective? How do you know that?

As you can see, you cannot effectively analyze every component in a work – you’ll have to choose the most important in your particular work. It’s also very important to budget enough time for this project. If you’re striving for a good grade, critical analyses cannot be hammered out the night before they are due.

Don’t forget to visit the CGCC Writing Center early and often. You are welcome to stop by at any point in the writing process, even if you haven’t written a word yet!

**Sources**

Bellevue Community College Writing Lab Series Web site (http://www.bcc.ctc.edu/writinglab/CriticalAnalysis.html)
St. Louis Comm. Coll Writing Center Web site (www.stlcc.cc.mo.us/mc/support/ecw/fpages/Critical_Analysis.html)
El Paso Community College Writing Center Web site (www.epcc.edu/Student/Tutorial/Writingcenter/Handouts/criticalanalysisresearchpaper/criticalanalysisHandouts/WritingaCA.pdf)

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Dear GG:

I am having trouble with quotation marks. I can never remember if the punctuation goes INSIDE the quotation marks or OUTSIDE of them. Here’s a sentence I got marked off for:

My favorite poem is “The Love Song of J. ALfred Prufrock”.

My teacher tells me to put the period inside the quotation marks, but why? The quotation marks are setting off the poem title, right?

**Baffled in Bisbee**

Dear Baffled:

Thank you for your thought-provoking inquiry. According to our friends at Capital Community College, this is one of those grammar rules that relies less on logic than practice. Here’s a quick and easy rule to get you started:

“In the United States, periods and commas go inside the quotation marks regardless of logic.”

Apparently, in the United Kingdom, Canada, and other islands under the influence of Britain education, punctuation marks in relation to quotation marks are based more on logic. So, in the United States, your sentence would be:

My favorite poem is “The Love Song of J. ALfred Prufrock.”

But in England, the same sentence reads: My favorite poem is “The Love Song of J. ALfred Prufrock”.

There isn’t much rhyme or reason to this – it’s just the way it is! Punctuation other than periods and commas may go inside the quotation marks; it depends on the context of your sentence. To learn more, check out the webpage on quotation marks at http://grammar.ccc.commnet.edu/grammar/marks/quotation.htm
Writing a literary or film analysis is not an easy task. Just ask David Finley, English and Humanities instructor at CGCC.

“It’s hard for students to recognize how to build an argument within a paper that isn’t based on clear pro and con positions,” says Finley, who often assigns critical analysis assignments to students in his composition and literature courses. “But if you’re not arguing something in your essay, you’re really not saying anything.”

Finley helps his students avoid that pitfall by telling them to think of themselves as lawyers working on a court case. As writers, they need to come to a conclusion about what worked or didn’t work in the film or story then build a case to support their viewpoint. Failure to create a strong argument may be one reason why students drift off topic, writing too much summary and not enough analysis.

“I want to remind them that as their instructor, I’ve already seen this film or read this work multiple times!”

Instead, Finley teaches his students to use just enough summary to set up the scene, then spend the rest of their time writing their analysis of what worked and what didn’t.

“As a student, you’re building a case based on evidence. You must use and explain your evidence if you want your reader to agree with your conclusions.”

To get the job done, students need to plan on plenty of revision, something most students resist. Finley can relate. As an undergraduate at Appalachian State University in North Carolina, Finley tested out of English 101 and 102. That might seem like a good thing, but Finley said it left him unprepared for the level of commitment and time that good writing requires.

Finley is determined that his students will have what he missed – the opportunity to go beyond superficial connections in their writing. “I want students to dig deeper and have the confidence to say something with their writing.”

This spring, David Finley is teaching ENG 102: First Year Composition, ENH 202: World Literature after the Renaissance and ENG 218: Writing about Literature. He is also available in the Writing Center on Tuesday and Thursday afternoons for one-on-one help with any writing assignment, including your critical analysis!

I write entirely to find out what I’m thinking, what I’m looking at, what I see and what it means. What I want and what I fear. – Joan Didion (1934 -)
Clichés are expressions that began as original and witty statements but, over time, lost their power due to overuse. Instead of relying on an old, tired cliché to express your thoughts and ideas, take the time to develop original descriptions that give your reader something new and fresh to think about.

It’s not unusual to find clichés popping into your head while brainstorming or during your initial drafts. Go ahead and use them in your first draft, so you don’t disturb your flow of ideas. But know that you will need to search out those clichés during the revision process and replace them with original, thoughtful ideas.

Use the following list assembled by the Cerritos College Writing Center to find clichés in your own writing.

- ripped to shreds
- flat as a pancake
- cold as ice
- like a chicken with its head cut off
- live off the fat of the land
- quick as lightening
- dumb blond
- quick as a flash
- rain or shine
- fog as thick as pea soup
- keep your fingers crossed
- cool as a cucumber
- blow your own horn
- silent as the grave
- pull out all the stops
- good as gold
- born with a silver spoon in his mouth
- happy as a clam
- read the riot act
- rooted to the spot
- pretty as a picture
- a barrel of monkeys
- solid as the rock of Gibraltar
- as hard to find as a needle in a haystack
- unvarnished truth
- hard as nails
- rain cats and dogs
- meek as a lamb
- rise and shine
- smart as a whip
- a force to be reckoned with
- claw to the top
- don’t count your chickens before they’re hatched
- tumble to the bottom
- any port in a storm
- head over heels
- a fish out of water
- green as grass
- more power to you
- white as a ghost
- up the river without a paddle
- black as night
- handwriting on the wall
- like a bull in a China shop
- whisper sweet nothings
- in times of trouble
- movers and shakers
- does my heart good
- It’s better to have loved and lost than never to have loved at all

Whenever you edit and revise your writing and you come across clichés, strike them out and develop more accurate, more vivid detail. Your writing will come to life.

The great aim of education is not knowledge but action. – Herbert Spencer (1820 – 1903)

Did You Know?

**College is a better investment than stock market!**

Want a surefire way to make a million dollars? Complete your four-year college education and you can expect to earn $1 million more over your lifetime.

That’s the findings of the recent study, “The Value of Higher Education: Individual and Societal Benefits,” conducted by the W.P Carey School of Business at Arizona State University.

Yet despite this high return, just 25 percent of the adult population in the United States has at least a bachelor’s degree. In comparison, more than 50 percent of Americans invest in the stock market for far lower dividends.

A college education also benefits the community, the study found. After 20 years of supporting the costs of providing a higher education, states can expect net social returns of $364 million in today’s dollars!

So why do so few Americans finish their four-year degree? It’s not a lack of financial resources – the study found that government loans and scholarship aid have addressed that issue. For many students, it’s a combination of family and environmental factors combined with a lack of information about the costs and benefits of a degree.