

HOW TO WRITE AN ESSAY OF LITERARY CRITICISM

BEFORE YOU BEGIN

- in the wise words of my own English teacher, Colin Eastwood: *Write for a reader who is intelligent and knows the book – and prove the same is true of you*
- be aware of the difference between plagiarism and academic writing
- be aware of the difference between summary and analysis (only do the former if it is asked for)

PRESENTING WORK

- an essay in the correct format is both a courtesy to the reader and much easier to use for revision
- any other attitude is a sign of immaturity

STYLE SHEET

- improperly presented work will be marked down (you are now living in the real world)
- contractions (*can't*) cannot be accepted
- if writing by hand, use lined paper with an adequate margin (maths paper will not be accepted)
- handwriting must be legible
- in handwritten essays, mistakes are inevitable and can be crossed out neatly
- computer-written essay should be in font size 10 or 12 and double-spaced (this makes corrections easier)
- computer-written essays should use footnotes
- if sent as an attachment by e-mail, use standard Word .doc format (not .docx if using Office 2007)
- always include a bibliography of your sources

DEADLINE

- a deadline is to be met, not exceeded
- plan your work in the knowledge that anything handed in late will not be accepted (in fact, it is wiser not to attempt to do this)

THE TASK

- underline the key words
- decide what is asked in the task (it is surprisingly easy to write an essay on something which has not been asked for – we have all done it)

RESEARCH

- read a range of secondary literature (remember that the academic world survived quite healthily for centuries before the internet with things called *books* in places called *libraries*)

- take written notes of ideas and useful vocabulary
- note down some particularly pertinent quotations (including citation)

ANSWER PLAN

- look at your notes
- decide *what is your argument?* (especially in a test situation, it is easy to start writing without having decided what you really want to say)
- decide *how best to introduce your argument* (make sure you refer to the key ideas of the task in your introduction)
- decide *how best to support your argument* (arrange your notes, vocabulary, quotations in paragraphs and decide in which order these should be – remember, you may decide at this point to exclude some of your notes as being less relevant)
- decide *how best to conclude your argument*

WRITING

- keep your answer plan next to the sheet of paper you are writing on
- be prepared to modify your plan while you write

CHECKING YOUR FINISHED WORK

- read to see if your argument is clear
- read to see if your language needs modification (use a spellchecker, perhaps use a dictionary to confirm that a word really does mean what you think it means)

A FINAL SUGGESTION

The following was added by one of my sons (who has had to write many essays in his academic life):

You might want to add a paragraph on the importance of a strong, convincing and original opening. The opening sentences are crucial to determining how your examiner is going to read (and then evaluate) your essay.

Secondly, you might want to have a point about the importance of argument/analysis over data/information. A bad essay is one crammed with factual points in lieu of an argument. An argument is made through analysis. It is not made by amassing ill-connected pieces of information. The main purpose of including factual information in an essay is to support or illustrate argument. (Of course, argument needs such support to be convincing.)

Finally, when writing an essay of lit. crit. avoid simply summarising (re-telling) the book/short-story or aspects thereof. (Of course, sometimes you might have to give a very brief - though pertinent and sharply focused! - summary of some passage(s) to illustrate/support your argument.)

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