



CRITICAL ESSAY

Characteristics of a Critical Essay

- The purpose is to analyze and evaluate a work (a book, a theory, a plan of action)
(Note: Analysis means to break down and study the parts. Evaluate means to assess strengths and weaknesses).
- Writer's position is supported with detailed evidence documented by quotes and paraphrases
- Begins with an examination of the work
- Written in 3rd person (using "it", "he", "she", "they"), uses formal language to discuss someone or something

- Sample focus of the paper:
 - An analysis of "The Bean Eaters," by Gwendolyn Brooks
 - An analysis of President Bush's position on educational policy

WARNING: If the purpose of your writing is not to critique, but rather to inform or to persuade a reader about something, it is possible you have wandered into the wrong essay. Please check our other handouts on the Expository and Persuasive Essays to find the most appropriate one for your writing purpose.

When writing a paper, you should follow these six steps. This handout guides you through the six steps for writing a Critical Essay.

- Step 1. Organizing your Thoughts (Brainstorming)
- Step 2. Researching your Topic
- Step 3. Developing a Thesis Statement
- Step 4. Writing the Introduction
- Step 5. Writing the Body of the Essay
- Step 6. Writing the Conclusion

Step 1: Organizing your Thoughts (Brainstorming)

Believe it or not, there is almost no topic on which your mind will draw a complete blank. Even if you know very little about the subject matter, you are likely to respond based on something you heard or read on the topic, or even your basic values. It is imperative to take an inventory of what you know first. This kind of brainstorming can be done in a number of ways:

- **Free writing** – writing quickly, without stopping, editing, or self-correcting to become aware of what you **already** know, think, or feel on a topic
- **Subject tree** – related ideas, connecting outwards from the main topic, in a tree form
(See illustration 1)
- **List** – free flow of ideas on a topic (See illustration 2)
- **Clustering** – main topic is in the middle circle, all related associations are linked to the main topic (See illustration 3)
- **Outline** – framework of an essay, which includes main points, followed by the breakdown into sub-points (See illustration 4)

Below are visual illustrations of these brainstorming methods. When using them, simply rely on what you already know on the topic – facts, opinions, emotions, or concerns.

Subject Tree

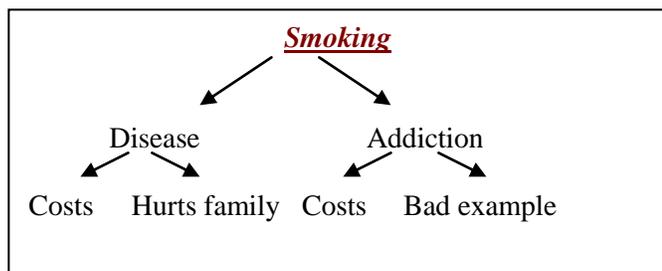


Illustration 1

List

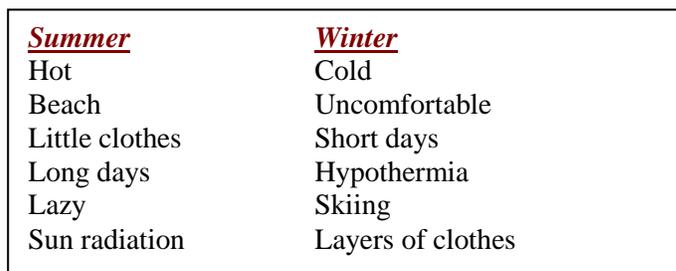


Illustration 2

Cluster

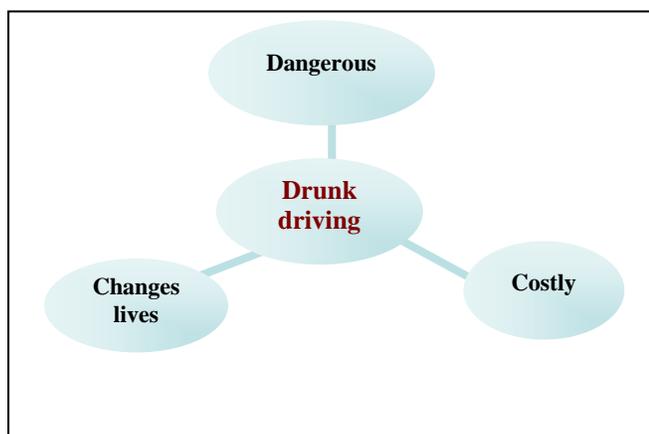


Illustration 3

Outline

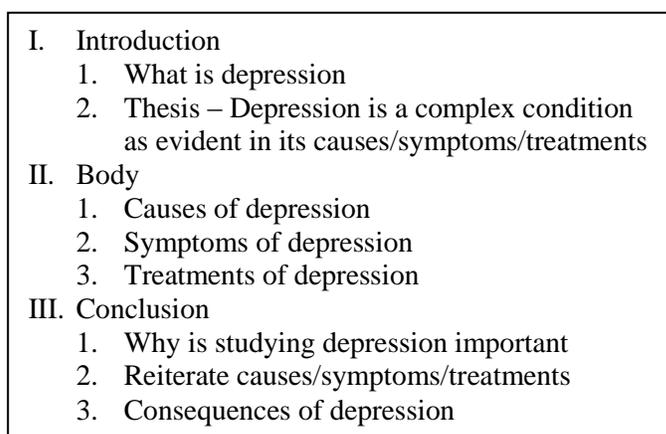


Illustration 4

This is not the time for evaluating your ideas; instead, it is the time for an *outpour* of ideas on all background knowledge you have on the topic. Once your thoughts are on paper, you can start organizing them by grouping ideas and identifying areas where more information is required.

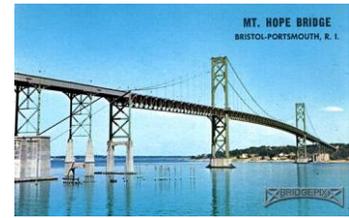
Step 2: Researching your Topic

Research may require going to a library or searching online. All research should be current (check with your instructor for acceptable time frames). Acceptable sources are reference works, books, and scholarly articles by experts. Encyclopedias and popular magazines should not be used in academic writing.

When using information from a Web site, evaluate the site for timeliness and reputability. Also, consider the site’s purpose, the reliability of its sponsors, and credibility of the author. Make sure to collect all necessary reference information in order to give credit to the authors. Refer to our *Plagiarism* handout for tips on how to avoid plagiarism.

NOTE: The two steps – organization of thoughts and research of the topic – interrelate. In other words, organizing your thoughts may identify gaps in your knowledge, which may lead you to conduct necessary research. However, once you conduct research, you should re-organize your thoughts to evaluate the clarity of the topic.

Step 3: Developing a Thesis Statement

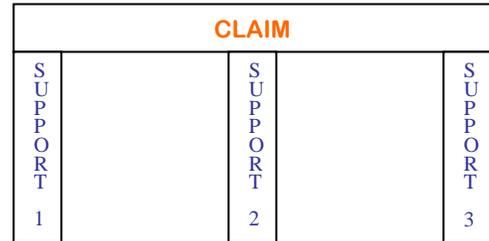


Developing a thesis statement is like building a bridge. In a bridge, the cross-beam (driveway) has to be held up by strong columns in order for the bridge to function. Similarly, **a thesis has two main components** – a claim and the supporting details that sustain it. In the bridge analogy, a cross-beam represents a claim, and the columns represent supporting details.

Claim

A claim is a one-sentence statement that

- Makes an assertion or takes a stance
- Is based on a generalization
- Is not a fact
- Is debatable
- Must be presented in the introduction of the essay



When making a claim, ask yourself any of the following:

Example

- What point am I trying to make?
- What am I trying to say?
- What am I getting at?

Civil Rights Movement occurred in the 1960s. (Weak because it states a fact, which is not debatable)
 Civil Rights Movement had a tremendous impact on the American society. (Stronger because it presents a position)

Supporting Details

Supporting details provide the means for reinforcing the claim, and can be organized in different patterns – 1) categories or topics; 2) time frames or chronological periods; and 3) causes or effects.

Thesis Statement

To create a thesis statement, combine the claim and the supporting details in one sentence. The direction of your essay can change depending on the pattern in which you organize the supporting details.

Supporting details organized into categories:

The Civil Rights Movement had a tremendous impact on the American society, as evident in the changes that occurred within the *legal, moral,* and cultural systems.

Supporting details organized into time frames:

The impact of the Civil Rights Movement on the American society can be traced through the three stages of the Movement – the early years (1950s), the central fight (1960-1970s), and the post-movement years (1980 and after).

Supporting details organized into causes:

The Civil Rights Act of 1964, the Voting Rights Act 1965, and President Johnson’s Affirmative Action Executive Order of 1965 were the most impactful accomplishments of the Civil Rights Movement within the American society.

Example

NOTE: Writing is a fluid process. As you complete your essay, you may realize that your thesis needs to be modified to reflect your position better.

Step 4: Writing the Introduction

The introduction is the most general part of the paper. It helps provide a roadmap for further discussion or analysis. This simplified formula offers components for a basic introduction:

- Definition:** Identify, define, and/or describe the topic, concept, or literary theme. What will you be talking about?
Relevance: Show the importance of your topic, concept or theme. How does it relate to or impact society?
Thesis: Copy the thesis statement you generated in the previous step.

Example

- Topic:** Civil Rights Movement
Definition: The Civil Rights Movement of 1960s sought to gain equality for African Americans. It was a period of unrest and rebellion within the American society.
Relevance: As a result of the movement, African Americans, for the first time, acquired access to the opportunities and services previously denied.
Thesis: The Civil Rights Movement had a tremendous impact on the American society, as evident in the changes within the legal, moral, and cultural systems.

Step 5: Writing the Body of the Essay

The body of the essay is the most detailed part. It involves addressing each supporting detail in a separate fully-developed paragraph. Make sure to include the necessary evidence from your research.

It is imperative that each supporting detail be announced or introduced within the text. This introduction is called a *topic sentence* and it is found at the beginning of a paragraph. The topic sentence is a statement you make about the supporting detail.

Example

- Topic sentence 1:** As a result of the Civil Rights Movement, the United States' legal system went through drastic modifications.
Topic sentence 2: The moral structure of the American society has also experienced a fundamental shift.
Topic sentence 3: Finally, the face of the American culture changed as a result of the Civil Rights Movement.

Step 6: Writing the Conclusion

Conclusion brings the paper to a close. It should be similar to the introduction, but worded differently. It allows you to reiterate and summarize the main points of the essay. The following components comprise a conclusion:

- Relevance:** Repeat the importance of your topic.
Review: Reiterate the points you discussed.
Summary: Summarize your conclusions.

Example

- Relevance:** In conclusion, the fight for civil rights proved to be a turning point in American society.
Review: This paper reviewed the influence of the movement on the legal, moral, and cultural systems of the United States.
Summary: Clearly, the changes initiated by the Civil Rights Movement altered the structure of the American Society.