

How to Write a Literary Criticism

A **literary criticism** is a formal essay that explores a particular facet of a literary work, whether it is a short story, a novel or a poem. Some criticism examines closely the use of literary devices, while some deals with broader issues such as characterization, motifs, or themes. In addition, there are several “schools” of literary criticism – examples include Marxist, psychological, and feminist (or gender) criticism.

Regardless of the approach you choose to take to examine a work, the presentation of the criticism must be organized and formal. There is not one particular way to write a literary criticism, but this method of constructing and organizing a literary criticism may assist you as you approach the task.

WRITING AN INTRODUCTION

First of all, your introduction does not have to be written first. In fact, it may be one of the last pieces of the paper that you compose. You **must** have a working thesis to guide you as you write your essay, but the full introduction may be written after you have composed the body of your paper. Regardless of your approach, the introduction is what will be read first; therefore it is crucial that you spend some time crafting an introduction that can set the tone and direction of your essay.

Generally, an introduction should be between three and eight sentences long, but should NOT discuss any specific element of your paper. Do not introduce any evidence that supports your thesis yet; save it for the body paragraphs.

Opening:

Use a “gentle” opening into the main topic of your paper, without referencing the actual work. You can give a brief historical context for the piece you are discussing, or you can open with a general statement about an abstract idea that forms the basis of your paper – love, honesty, gender roles, courage, nature, etc. Don’t make this too wordy.

AVOID the following:

- Sweeping general statements – “All of mankind seeks to understand God.”, “Since the dawn of time, humans have pondered the existence of evil.”
- Rhetorical questions that are immature – “Have you ever wondered...?”
- Cliché or trite quotes or allusions – “The only thing we have to fear...”, “One small step for man...”, anything about Hitler)

Transition

Use a transitional statement that links the novel, drama, poem that you are analyzing to the general opening and your concrete and specific thesis. You should include not only the title, but the full name of the author and, if appropriate, the genre of the work.

Thesis

The thesis is the single most important piece of your paper. It must be phrased in the form of an opinion, which you must then support with evidence from the text and analysis which proves that your opinion has merit.

Ineffective Thesis:

The “Prologue” to *The Canterbury Tales* is set up as Chaucer’s introduction of the characters of his work.

Why is this ineffective? That is because you have nothing to prove. As a result, your analysis will be nothing more than showing that there were different characters – hardly an upper-level essay.

Effective Thesis:

Geoffrey Chaucer uses satire in his portrayal of the characters in “The Prologue” to *The Canterbury Tales* to highlight the corruption within the Catholic Church during the Middle Ages.

Now you have something to prove. It may undergo some “tweaking”, but this will be your focus throughout your writing.

Understand that it should highlight the main point(s) of your paper and that every piece of evidence and every statement you make thereafter should support this idea.

Example:

(Opening) For those who lived during the Middle Ages, the population was largely divided into one of three “Estates”. The Third Estate, those of the working class, was governed by the nobility and royalty, the Second Estate. However, there was one indisputable power representing Almighty God; this was the First Estate, the clergy of the Church in all of its various forms. To question the First Estate was not only inappropriate, it was heretical and dangerous.

(Transition) Geoffrey Chaucer, in “The Prologue” to *The Canterbury Tales* manages to take aim against the clergy who behaved as hypocrites who failed to follow the examples of Christ and who abused their power. He accomplishes this through his delicate use of humor and hyperbole, presenting individual members of the clergy as caricatures.

(Thesis) Through his use of satire, Chaucer exposed the larger issue of the corruption within the Catholic Church by presenting individual characters who took advantage of their positions and abused their power, resulting in suffering for the poor and middle class who were at their mercy.

BODY PARAGRAPHS

Topic Sentence

You must start with a topic sentence that narrows your thesis to one main focus for each body paragraph. Do not start off with a piece of evidence from the text.

Evidence

Set up your evidence by providing context for the quote (when, who, etc.) *without* getting into plot summary. Remember that your audience is familiar with the work you are discussing. The evidence should be blended seamlessly so that when read aloud, it would be hard to tell when your writing shifts to the author's.

Analysis

The general rule of thumb is this: for every piece of evidence you present, you should have a minimum of two sentences analyzing its significance and support of your thesis. Some helpful questions to ask yourself in order to come to insightful analysis include:

- **“Why is this included in the work?”** – Do *not* answer this specifically in your essay, but realizing what happens if you take it *out* of the work will tell you why it is *in* the work.
(Remove the dramatic irony of knowing that Juliet is not really dead, and how does this change the audience's tension watching Romeo kill himself?)
- **“How does this piece of evidence fit with the rest of the work?”** - Is it similar to other events in the work (pattern) or does it provide a contrast (shift)? Does this set up some sort of conflict that must be dealt with? Does this provide any insight into a character's actions, motives, or personality?
- **“Does it contribute to the mood of the piece or provide foreshadowing?”** - Does the audience get any preparation for upcoming events through this evidence? Is it necessary that the author does so?
- **“Can I make an informed argument about the author's purpose?”** – Does the author use this event/character to make a point about the nature of the world or the possible consequences of actions?

These are not the only questions to ask, but they are a good starting point.

REMEMBER YOUR THESIS –

Your arguments are not effective if they are not supporting your thesis.

Concluding Sentence

End your body paragraph with a *concluding sentence* that provides a sense of closure, finalizes the paragraph's connection to the thesis, and prepares the reader for the shift in the next paragraph.

Example:

(Topic Sentence) The member of the clergy who is arguably the most corrupt among those in *The Canterbury Tales* is the Friar, who preys on the parishioners for his own material gain but ignores their spiritual needs. **(Context)** As a priest, one of the most sacred duties of the Friar is to hear the confessions of his parishioners and to absolve them of their sins. **(Evidence)** However, the Friar chooses instead to abuse his duty and turn it to his own profit as “[s]weetly he heard his penitents at shrift/With pleasant absolution for a gift. He was an easy man in penance-giving/ Where he could hope to make a decent living” (lines 225-229). **(Analysis)** This corruption was not uncommon during the time, and the Friar demonstrates how this practice of “indulgences” was tantamount to extortion. For the rich, there was no fear of any painful penance and therefore no fear of committing a sin; forgiveness could be purchased, though it is unlikely that any absolution received under these circumstances would be genuine. For the poor, however, the hardships were obvious. Those who could not provide a worthwhile “gift” were sure to receive a harsher penance and would suffer greatly as a result. The fear of damnation resulted therefore in financial hardships or painful humiliation. **(Transition)** However, the Friar does not only use his parishioners for his own comfort and profit, he also neglects them in his most basic duties as a priest. **(Evidence)** Though he welcomes the company of the “rich and victual sellers”, he believes that it “was not fitting with the dignity of his position, dealing with a scum of/ Wretched lepers” or in “commerce with such slum-and-gutter dwellers” (lines 248-252). **(Analysis)** The Friar clearly makes a delineation between those with whom he will and will not associate, an example of the clergy’s hypocrisy in their teachings versus their practices. Though Chaucer does use a tongue-in-cheek approach in his accusation of the Friar, the meaning is not lost on his audience. The diction chosen by Chaucer of the poor as “slum-and-gutter dwellers” shows the extreme disdain the Friar has for the poor, as well as the Friar’s view of his own self-importance and “the dignity of his position”. Of course, Chaucer’s audience will have been well aware of the image of Christ’s choice to associate with the poor and will see this as an obvious decision on the part of the priest to marginalize and neglect the neediest of his parishioners. **(Concluding Sentence)** Through this rebuke of the Friar, though set up as an extreme example, Chaucer exposes the common attitude of so many members of the First Estate as being “above” the rest of society, who are then extorted and abused for personal gain.

CONCLUSION

More than a mere re-statement of ideas already mentioned, the conclusion should serve as the justification for the paper and the final argument for the validity of the thesis. It should bring the paper to closure, and any ideas referenced in the introduction should be brought back around and resolved. In short, the conclusion answers the question, “So what?”.

1. Pull your focus back out to the thesis.

This is the point where you give a 1-2 sentence wrap up of your paper. It can be a restatement of the thesis, but try to be more specific in the points than you were in the introduction. You may refer to characters and events, but only to remind your reader – not to re-argue your point.

2. Take the paper back out to the “Big Idea”.

If you used a quote or a reference in the introduction, now is the time to show the link to the reader. How has your argument (thesis) related to the issue that is more universal?

3. Provide relevance for the reader

In the end, why should the reader care about your ideas? What is the overall relevance of this work in addressing the issue? When a work ceases to be relevant, it will no longer be read. So, what do we understand about human nature and its struggle with this issue through this work

Example:

In the end, Chaucer does provide his audience with one noble religious character who lived according to his vows and the example of Christ – one member of the clergy who both taught and practiced the teachings of the Church. However, it is no accident that he is greatly outnumbered by members of the clergy who abused their positions of power within The First Estate and lived outside their vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience. Through his use of biting satire, Chaucer exposes these members of the clergy for what they were – at best, poor examples to the parishioners and, at worst, corrupt individuals who preyed on the helpless for their own gain.