

READING CRITICALLY: GUIDE TO WRITING A CRITICAL ANALYSIS¹

One of the aims of this course is to help you to develop the analytical and critical skills essential in third-level studies.

Learning to read carefully and critically, and to present written arguments in a sustained and coherent manner, is a central part of these modules and is an essential transferable skill for future study in any sphere, as well as for the world of work.

Much of the reading we do every day is simply for information—newspapers, advertisements, timetables, etc. We read them once, absorb the information, and move on. The study of literature or of film, however, calls for more refined reading skills, specifically for the ability to read critically. This means not just reading a text or a work once to understand what it says, but re-reading it in order to identify how it is put together and why it is put together in that way—i.e. what effect it is trying to produce.

Re-reading

When you are reading a work in a foreign language, from an alien culture, and/or from a different period the first stage—working out what the work says—may be difficult and time-consuming. But it is essential to build on that effort by going through the work, for example the text or the film or the play, again, this time to see how it has been put together. This second reading will take much less time than the first and will be extremely productive.

Literary texts are carefully composed and structured by their authors, and it is this ‘constructed’ nature of the text that is the focus of literary study. It only becomes fully evident through re-reading. It is important to take notes on the text as you re-read it (see below); these will be essential in planning written assignments and preparing for exams.

This course is designed to develop your ability to read critically and analytically. The success of classes depends on student participation; you should use them as a forum in which to test your ideas and develop your expressive skills.

Taking notes

Taking notes as you read will help you to concentrate better on the work that you are reading and will provide you with an essential foundation for planning essays and for pre-exam revision work.

During a first reading, you may want to keep note-taking to a minimum, as you look up vocabulary etc. When you have completed your reading, you can make a brief note of characters (their attributes, their relations to one another) and plot (including any sub-plots), as well as any other points that seem important to you.

¹ Adapted from *French Reading Modules Brochure, University College Dublin—School of Languages and Literatures* (Michael Brophy, Emer O’Beirne, Douglas Smith, et al). NB: “A rose is a rose is a rose is a rose”: The principles and practical methods of critical analysis that follow here should continue to be relevant and useful to you at all levels, through to final-year and postgraduate “close commentary” work, as well as in other areas of work in the outside world, and indeed in everyday life ... (Rose quotation: Gertrude Stein, *Sacred Emily*. “What’s in a name? that which we call a rose / By any other name would smell as sweet”; Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet* II.ii 1-2.)

This outline can then be expanded into more detailed notes during a second reading, as you look out for details of vocabulary, images, structure, style(s) of language etc. Also note the page references of important passages which might be useful: whether immediately or for your later work. At this stage it is important that your reading, and your notes, go beyond the purely descriptive stage—stating ‘what happened’—to show analysis and interpretation—i.e. how the text or the work is constructed, why it might be constructed in that particular way, and what effect is being sought.

Writing about reading

In many university courses, literary and otherwise, you will be learning to present your observations on texts through four types of written exercise: summary/synopsis, critical analysis /commentary, essay-writing, and more extended/extensive research-papers. These exercises develop different though complementary skills.

Critical analysis focuses on short passages; sometimes whole short poems. It is based on close reading and attention to the detail of the poem's or passage's language. It concentrates on *the interaction between theme and form* in the text. The average length of a critical analysis runs to around four pages (1000 words), though critical analyses at higher levels may be longer.

For reference

Cuddon, J.A. *A Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory*. 3rd revised ed. (London: Penguin, 1991).

Introduction to Critical Analysis

The next section contains general information on Critical Analysis. They are followed by specific guidelines on ‘Critical Analysis of Prose’ and ‘Critical Analysis of Poetry.’ Depending on the text and passage that you're dealing with, you may find that *both* sets of guidelines are useful: many of the guidelines on poetry (ex. imagery) are applicable to most literary texts.

Definition/description

Critical analysis is an exercise based on the close reading of a short text such as a poem or a passage of narrative fiction. Although there will be differences between critical analyses dealing with different literary genres, certain general principles apply to all kinds. The most important aspects to cover are: **context** (where the passage is an extract from a longer text), **content**, and **form**. While it is useful to think of these dimensions of the text as distinct, a good analysis will show how, in reality, they interact with one another.

Preparation

Read the poem or passage carefully, at least twice. Use a dictionary to ensure that you understand all the vocabulary, and make sure that you have grasped the literal sense of all the sentences in the text. If the text is an extract from a longer work, make sure you have read the entire work.

CRITICAL ANALYSIS 2

General information: Elements of a critical analysis

In writing a critical analysis, you will be presenting, in around four pages, a detailed account of the passage in question, in terms of context, content, and form.

Given the amount of textual detail you will be dealing with, you will need to present your findings in an organised, clearly structured way.

Note that your final work does not have to be a complete, comprehensive, exhaustive analysis: that is not the intention of the exercise, and why you have the constraint of a page- and/or word-limit. Rather: this is a *critical* analysis; incorporating your critical appreciation, response, reaction, and interpretation; and it should focus on your choice of what you consider to be the most important elements in the text.

What follows is a suggestion for how you might structure your analysis. You may wish to organise it differently; the important thing is that it must be clearly ordered and cover the main points relating to the passage's context (where applicable), content, and form.

1. Introduction

- **Context:** If the passage is an extract rather than a complete work such as a poem, you must situate it briefly in relation to the text as a whole. Locate its place in terms of the plot and the structure of the whole work. This part should be kept as concise as possible: its purpose is simply to provide a context for your detailed analysis of the passage.
- Give a brief introductory summary of **content** and **form**:
 - **Content:** State concisely what the passage is about: what happens in it and what changes occur as it develops.
 - **Form:** Note briefly the most important structural aspects only (narrative technique for prose, verse form for poetry). You will discuss these in much more detail in the main section of your analysis.
 - The question '**What** is it about?'/ '**What** does it mean?' asks about **content**; the question '**How** does it convey its meaning?' addresses **form**.

2. Main section

- In this section you will analyse in detail the relationship between the **form** of the text and its **content**.
 - This is the essential part of the exercise, and to master it you need to get into the habit of reading 'interrogatively'—i.e. asking **what** effects the text is creating and then **how** it is creating them.
 - Another strategy is to ask **what** stylistic characteristics are present in the text and then **why** they are there.

The best way to proceed is through a combination of both lines of questioning. At the same time as you are on the lookout for formal features, keep asking yourself how you are responding to different parts of the text, and what stylistic elements might be provoking that effect.

- Don't lose sight of the 'big picture': as well as paying attention to details, look out for general structural features such as parallels, contrasts, repetition, variation, etc.
- Structure your observations either by proceeding through the passage line by line and commenting on noteworthy features, or by identifying and concentrating on particularly important moments. In both cases, pay special attention to how formal aspects of the passage reinforce its meaning.
- Avoid gratuitous description. In other words, don't just give a random catalogue of recognisable technical features like alliteration, metaphor, etc.—you must be able to identify the effects they produce. Only features which you can show to have a function should be mentioned.

3. Conclusion

- Summarise your findings—how themes or character or plot are developed and how formal techniques are deployed.
- Where applicable, note which aspects of the extract's form and content link it to the text as a whole.
- You may wish to offer your personal judgement of the text. Keep in mind that it must impress your reader as valid—it must arise logically from the analysis you have undertaken, and that analysis in turn must be firmly rooted in the words on the page.

General advice on critical analysis

- Concentrate on what the use of formal devices achieves.
- Focus on what seem to you to be the most important moments, in terms of both theme and form.
- Look out in particular for significant parallels and contrasts, repetition and variation.
- Avoid paraphrase (telling the story).
- Keep generalisations about the work or the author to a minimum, confined to your conclusion.

Specific guidelines: Critical Analysis of Prose—Checklist

What follows is a list of points which might feature in a critical analysis of a prose passage. It is not exhaustive, and, depending on the passage, not all the points may be appropriate. You do not have to write about every single item in the checklist: *you* must choose which elements are most relevant to the specificities of the passage *you* are analysing, and to *your own reading* of it. This list is not intended to be followed slavishly, item by item, but to remind you of questions you may have overlooked.

CONTEXT

- Where does the passage come?
- What leads up to it?
- What follows it?

These basic questions lead to broader ones:

- What contribution does the passage make to the text as a whole? For example, does it present a development at the stage of plot or characterisation?
- Does it say or do anything new?
- Does it present a key moment or relate a key event?
- Does it explicitly echo another part of the narrative?
- To what extent do thematic or stylistic elements tie in with the wider context?

CONTENT

- What is the passage about?
- What does it mean?

These questions need to be addressed on more than one stage. Superficially, the passage may be about a character, situation, event, etc. But at a more sophisticated stage you need to consider questions like:

- What themes does the passage explore?
- What issues does it raise?
- What claims, arguments, etc. (if any) does it make?

These themes/issues/arguments may be implicit rather than explicit, but it is important that you be able to identify them. Your knowledge of the whole text is central here.

FORM

- How does the passage convey its meaning?

This question—“**how does it work?**”—is the central question of critical analysis. The following are some aspects of form to consider when you are analysing a piece of prose:

Structure

- How is the passage organised?
- What gives it its coherence?
- If there is a sense of completion at the end, how is this created?
- How does the passage move from point to point, sentence to sentence, paragraph to paragraph?
- Is there linear development or a circular structure?
- Are points linked by a logic of contrast or elaboration?
- Are there significant breaks?
- Are there changes of pace? (If the passage seems to fall into distinct parts, you could consider analysing each section separately.)

Narrative form

- Who is telling the story? a.k.a. **the narrator**:
 - Is the story being told by a third- or first-person narrator?
 - Is s/he inside or outside the story?
 - If inside, how central to events is s/he?
 - Does s/he know everything about the events (i.e. is his/her perspective omniscient or limited)?
 - Is s/he reliable or unreliable?
 - Is there more than one narrator?
 - Does the narrator describe things from someone else's point of view (a character's)?
 - Does the point of view change in the passage?
 - NB: The voice telling the story in prose fiction is always the narrator's. Their beliefs and attitudes may well be those of the author too; but the author, as a real person, is outside the fictional world and so, for the purposes of analysis, not considered as present in the text.

- How is s/he telling it? a.k.a. **narrative techniques**:
 - Is the passage predominantly narrative (recounting events), descriptive (of a situation, place, character, etc.), discursive (discussing an issue), etc.?
 - What is the proportion of dialogue to narrative?
 - How does each type of discourse function in terms of conveying information about events, characters, etc.?

Language and style

- Are sentences long or short, simple or complex?
- If there is imagery, what kind (simile/metaphor/symbol/personification, etc.)?
- Is the register elevated/colloquial/familiar/slang?
- What kind of vocabulary is used?
- Does it come from a specific semantic field (i.e., do a number of words relate to the same topic or area of meaning)?
- Is it abstract or concrete, emotive or neutral, characterised by directness or circumlocution, etc.?

Tone

- What attitude do the words of the speaker (narrator or speaking character) convey?

The attitude may be towards events, characters, even towards the reader. There are many possibilities: tragic, comic, ironic, earnest, lyrical, sentimental, optimistic, intimate, etc. Etc.

Specific guidelines: Critical Analysis of Poetry—Checklist

What follows is a list of points which might feature in a critical analysis of a piece of poetry. It is not exhaustive, and not all the points may be relevant to any given poem. When analysing a complete poem in isolation, the question of context does not always arise. For this reason, analysing a poem is an excellent way to practise and perfect articulating your response to a piece of literature: all the material you need is there on the page in front of you...

Note that you do not have to write about every single item in the checklist. *You* will need to judge which aspects are most important for the poem you are analysing. Above all, resist the temptation merely to list formal features with no discussion of their effects—only mention features which you can show to have a function in the overall design of the poem.

Like the previous one, this list is not intended to be followed slavishly, item by item, but to keep by you, to remind you of questions you may have overlooked.

CONTENT

- What is the poem about?
- What feelings does it evoke in the listener/reader?
- What kind of utterance is it?

In poetry, content and form are even more inextricably linked than in prose—it is impossible to paraphrase a poem, because its meaning is a function not only of its words but also of its form and its range of stylistic devices and acoustic effects. To paraphrase it would necessarily lead to a loss or alteration of meaning. Therefore your initial identification of the poem's theme is only a starting point: your task will be to show what the poet does formally with the basic theme to make the poem into a unique work of art. Ask not only what the poem does (it may evoke the pain of unrequited love, the transience of life, the joy of spring etc.), but also what it is (a love-song, a lament, a celebration, an appeal, etc.). Content meets form at this point.

FORM

- **How** is the poem's theme articulated? There are many aspects to this central question:

Structure

- Is the poem divided into stanzas, couplets, etc.?
- How are they linked?
- How are the different ideas, images, statements, etc. connected—intensification of a single idea, conflict between opposing elements, variations on a theme, repetitions, etc.?
- What is the relationship between the formal layout of lines and stanzas and the way the ideas are developed?
- How does the poem begin and end—an abrupt or gentle opening, a conclusive and satisfying or inconclusive ending?

Verse form

- Is there a defined form (sonnet, ballad, etc.)?
- If so, is it being used in a conventional way?
- How does it affect the development of the theme?

Metre and rhyme scheme

- What is the rhyme scheme?
- What effects does it have (e.g. associations between rhyming words [including internal rhyme], contrastive effects of juxtaposition of different rhymes, etc.)?
- What is the line length?
- What effects do long or short lines have?
- Is there enjambement between lines and how does it relate to the sense?
- Are rhyme scheme and line length regular?
- If not, what is the effect of irregularities?

(NB Be extremely careful that any irregularities you identify in the number of syllables per line or in the rhyme scheme are not in the eye of the beholder! If you think you've found one syllable more or fewer than the norm in a particular line, you may very well be wrong, so count again! Regularity is the norm; exceptions are extremely rare.)

Vocabulary

- Are the words of the poem predominantly abstract or concrete? neutral or emotive? simple or elaborate? descriptive or evaluative?
- Is there a preponderance of verbs, nouns, adjectives, etc.?

Word combinations

- Are there acoustic echoes (alliteration or assonance), semantic echoes (synonyms, words with similar connotations)?
- Do words have connotations beyond their primary meaning (their 'denotative' meaning) which are activated by the context?

Syntax

- Is it simple or complex?
- Are there full sentences, questions, exclamations?
- Is the word order straightforward or strange?

A poem is an extremely complex linguistic utterance—beware of glossing over 'difficulties', ironing out intended ambiguities, etc. If the meaning of part or all of the poem remains opaque, say why—analysing the difficulties can itself be enlightening.

Imagery

- Is it plentiful or rare?
- What kind of atmosphere or scene does it help to conjure up?
- What kind of rhetorical devices convey it (see below)?

Figures of speech/rhetorical devices

- Are there (m)any?
- What kind—metaphors, similes, personifications, paradoxes, repetitions, contrasts, accumulations, etc.?

Tone

- Does the poem give the impression of being declaimed like a public speech, murmured to oneself, whispered to a listener, etc.?
- Read it aloud to help you decide. Is it ironic, lyrical, comic etc.?