

Essay Basics

AEW

Weaver (rev. 9/04)

5 The following points should help you prepare to write an in-class essay of criticism or analysis:

10 Write in paragraphs, most of which should be about half a page in length. Leave margins (especially on the left), and space between lines for correction. In English, we indent the first line of each paragraph.

15 Avoid tediously paraphrasing the text or explaining the obvious. Assume that your reader already knows the text. Describe what you see as its meaning or significance.

20 Organize your ideas logically (a series of ideas related to each other) or 'organically' (ideas developing naturally from each other). Organic essays work nicely if they begin with less complicated aspects of the topic and gradually move to the more complicated, thus getting deeper into the topic.

30 Frequently use a variety of transition or connecting words and phrases to help the reader see the relationship of events and ideas in your paragraphs.

35 Support your general ideas with specific evidence, i.e., details from the text being analyzed. Such supporting detail includes references to story details (mentioning them), brief paraphrase (of a particular detail), or direct quotation using these conventions: " "

40 (quote); "" "" (quote within a quote); . . . (ellipsis); [] (editorial insertion). Give the quoted page number in parentheses *after* the quote: (p. 13). Use short quotations clearly related to your discussion (omitting irrelevant parts with ellipsis), not long ones going beyond the point you are illustrating.

50 In a sense, a critical essay recreates the story, but from one particular point of view. You focus on a particular theme or technique, and, in the process, gradually give us the 'essence' or 'meaning' of the story. A good essay gives us a sense of the fullness of the

story. Be careful not to ignore important aspects of the story that do not fit your interpretation. ('Adjust' your interpretation to fit the story.) Avoid merely following the story from beginning to end (commentary paraphrase).

Be aware of your limitations in English and work with them as you write and prepare to write. Absorb useful vocabulary (of analysis, and from the text). Avoid overly abstract -- and especially 'significant' -- vocabulary unless you give us a well-

defined context. Avoid complicated syntax in long sentences difficult to read and understand. Use structural devices like parallelism to clarify sentence intent.

Remember that an essay gives the reader some impression of you. Ideally, try to present yourself as reasonably well informed and humane -- not too modest, but certainly not arrogantly self-assured. Avoid hesitant phrases like "I think that" or "maybe this means that" and exaggerated efforts to convince, including unnecessary emphasis (e.g., 'very,' 'extremely'). Try to have confidence in your interpretation.

Use a moderate, 'natural' style, neither stiffly formal nor completely free and easy. Avoid cute slang and very casual or subjective language: "you know," "a shitty deal," "this really moves

Understand the text (story, play or novel) to the best of your ability. Learn vocabulary, study difficult or 'significant' passages, identify complexities or ambiguities, consider character, motivation, plot development, social or cultural setting, motifs, etc. Practice reading it (silently or aloud) until you have mastered its prose rhythms, until it 'sounds' natural and idiomatic, until it becomes convincing, or even moving. In class, ask questions, admit any uncertainties you have, and also be willing to disagree with other interpretations. Help make the discussions productive.

As much as you can, be intellectually flexible, resilient, open. Try to enjoy the process of analyzing. Consider it a 'game' if you wish, using free association to develop a variety of ideas from which you choose -- but take it seriously. Be sincere. Get involved in the text, in its situation, ideas, characters. Write as if you care. At the same time, of course, you may also -- and probably should -- keep your cool, your distance from the text intellectually and/or emotionally. After all, cool analysis gets us even closer to the heart of the text.

me, man!"

You are expected to use your own ideas about the text (or, of course, as the result of class discussion, 'our' ideas). *If* you use ideas from published sources, you must attribute them (with footnotes). Especially in the Anglo-Saxon world, plagiarism *must* be avoided.

Prepare in advance for each in-class essay -- even, if you wish, to the point of outlining or writing practice essays on themes likely to be assigned.