Writing Critical Essays

In this course you will be asked to write several critical essays. “Critical” often means “negatively judgmental,” as, for instance, when we tell a friend who is berating us, “Don't be so critical.” But in intellectual discussions, “critical” simply means “characterized by careful and exact evaluation and judgment” (“Critical”). Movie critics are critical in this sense. They evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of the films they review. They may evaluate them positively (Ebert and Roeper's “thumbs up”) or negatively (“thumbs down”). But they give reasons for their judgments. These components are essential in critical thinking and writing: to make evaluative judgments and to state reasons for those judgments.

The critical essays assigned in this course will require that you make reasoned evaluative judgments about the materials we're reading and discussing. A critical essay is more than an interpretation of what an author says; it is a report of your evaluation of what the author says. To evaluate an author's material properly, you must bring your own experiences, beliefs, discoveries, and the like into the discussion. In this sense, a critical essay is never simply correct or incorrect. Instead, it is well-argued and carefully presented or it is not. Not all critical essays need to make sweeping evaluations. An essay written to answer the question, “Is John A. T. Robinson's Honest to God a good book?” will undoubtedly be critical, but so will a more narrowly focused essay written to answer, “Does Robinson's rejection of a God ‘out there’ undercut the possibility of Christian faith?” The latter question requires you to go beyond Robinson and bring your own understanding of Christianity to bear.

The key to writing a successful critical essay is to start with a good critical question. That question need not be explicitly stated in your essay, though your one-sentence answer to it, known as the thesis, should be. The thesis is the foundation on which you build your essay. Critical questions require evaluative judgments as answers. If you begin with a question that is not critical, you will not write an essay that is critical. Here are examples of interpretive questions with little critical component, and critical questions:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interpretive</th>
<th>Critical</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>What is Friedrich Schleiermacher's view of salvation?</td>
<td>Does Friedrich Schleiermacher's view of salvation adequately take into account the New Testament?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What is John Locke's understanding of revelation?</td>
<td>Do you think John Locke's view of revelation is viable today?</td>
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<tr>
<td>How has the Christian doctrine of God changed over the past two centuries?</td>
<td>Are modern approaches to the doctrine of God better than those taken by the early church?</td>
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From these examples you can see that the critical task depends on your having asked and answered the interpretive questions. It is a common intellectual error to criticize an author before one has attempted sympathetically to understand what that author says. But a critical essay must go beyond a simple interpretation of the author's argument.

Your papers should:

(1) observe the basic rules of English grammar and style; failure to do so inhibits your attempt to communicate with others. A comprehensive manual of grammar and style is Jane E. Aaron, The Little, Brown Compact Handbook, 3rd. ed. (New York: Longman, 1998). Another helpful book in this regard is William Strunk, Jr. and E. B. White, The Elements of Style, 3rd. ed. (New York: Macmillan, 1979). The first edition (1918) of this little gem is now available on the World Wide Web at http://www.bartleby.com/141/index.html. Some of its 1918 advice is outdated (e.g., it suggests writing today as to-day) but it’s helpful if you don’t have the more recent editions.
(2) follow the uniform scheme for presentation of academic papers found in Joseph Gibaldi, *MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers*, 6th ed. (New York: Modern Language Association, 2003), *with the exception* that you should place the required heading on a separate cover sheet and put only the title of your paper (not your name) on the first page. Also, please number the pages in the top right corner and do not include your name with the page number. Then staple all the pages together in the top left corner.

(3) be neat and legible. They should be typed or word-processed, double-spaced, on standard (8.5 x 11 inch) white typing paper. Leave one-inch margins and use a twelve-point standard font such as Times Roman, Courier, Schoolbook, or the like. Do not use display or fancy fonts.

(4) *be entirely your own work*. If you use someone else's words or ideas, be scrupulous in acknowledging that fact by the use of quotation marks, where appropriate, and references. Failure to do so constitutes plagiarism. (See "Academic Conduct Policy" in the *University Calendar/Handbook*.)

**Criteria for evaluation:**

Your critical essays will be evaluated in light of the four criteria below. Papers that fulfill all these criteria in an exceptional way will be awarded *As*; papers that do so in a superior way, *Bs*; and papers that merely meet the criteria at satisfactory levels, *Cs*. Papers that do not fulfill one or more of the criteria at a satisfactory level will be given *Ds* and *Fs*, depending on the severity of the problems.

- **Organization:**

  The paper is exceptionally well organized. It contains a clear thesis statement that focuses the paper and each and every paragraph logically contributes to the development and defense of that thesis. The paper is succinct, to the point, and avoids needless words.

- **Understanding:**

  The paper exhibits a thorough and sympathetic understanding of the author's work and accurately explicates the author's argument where relevant to the development of its critical thesis.

- **Criticism**

  The paper takes a critical stance toward the material under examination, clearly articulating reasons for its critical evaluation. The criticisms are based on solid reasoning that is well supported with relevant evidence.

- **Mechanics**

  The paper is flawlessly presented, with no spelling or grammar errors. It properly references the ideas and words of others and conforms to the style stipulated by the *MLA Handbook*.

**Work Cited**


C. David Grant. Fall 1990, rev. Fall 2003