

Instructor: Dr. Robert C. Thomas
theory@sfsu.edu

How to Write a *Critical* Response Paper

These handouts on writing from my previous courses at SFSU are provided to give you a sense of what college level writing is and is not. You can use this handout to help you when writing your essay assignments.

Robert C. Thomas © 1998 - 2008

What is a *Critical* Response Paper?

A *critical* response paper does **not** simply re-state the narrative or plot of the article, novel, story, or film, nor does it rely solely upon personal anecdote for its substance (this doesn't mean that you can't include a personal comment or two). A critical response paper should clearly express the meaning of the work as you read it, and it should do so in as clear a way as possible. **It should go beyond "common sense" or "simple" interpretations of the work, delving deeper into its larger cultural, historical, social, political, or aesthetic meaning. Critical writing is writing that goes beyond a purely personal, anecdotal, common sense, perspective.** It tends to take the form of writing *about* works of cultural production (and what they mean in a larger, critical, context). It means **working** to go beyond your pre-established, pre-conceived notions. It means bracketing out—or *critically interrogating*—the unstated assumptions with which you approach a work in order to develop a more thoughtful relation to the social and cultural values (what you like, don't like, and are interested in) that you bring to your reading of it. The purpose of critical writing is to present an interpretation (or analysis) of a given work of cultural production.

What is critical writing? (A Handout for "Values and Culture" 1998)

Critical writing, for the purposes of this course, is writing which relates a given form of cultural production (an essay, novel, story, film or work of art) to its social, political, economic, literary, humanistic, aesthetic or historical context. The paper assignments are an opportunity for you to work on the **form** of critical writing, to improve your writing, and to show me what you are learning from the readings. You should think of them as highly structured journal entries: telling me what you were able to "make of" a particular piece of work (the *art* of interpretation), while showing me that you thought **critically** about it.

It is important to understand that an analysis *without a critical frame of reference* would **not** be considered a piece of critical writing. For example, a student in one of my courses chose to write a response paper to Kafka's "Before the Law." The perspective from which this paper was written, however, was based on an **uncritical** assessment of Kafka's life in relation to this parable. The author argued, among other things, that Kafka was not a "real man" because he never stood up to his father, that the man from the country in the parable (which the author equated with Kafka himself) gave up too easily in his quest to gain admittance to the law (the goal he was striving for), and didn't try to fight for what he wanted (access to "the law"). The paper concluded by stating that Kafka was a "social degenerate" (i.e. he was different and a social misfit).

What is wrong with this paper (as I have represented it here) as a piece of critical writing? The problem is that the "analysis" proceeds, almost solely, from an unsupported personal opinion or prejudice (i.e. an unstated presupposition). This is the opposite of criticism, insofar as *criticism is defined as an interrogation of presuppositions* (i.e. the cultural, historical, political, or

aesthetic assumptions that we bring to our work). The presuppositions of this response paper could, themselves, be critically examined (called into question). It could be pointed out that the ideas presented in this paper – in particular, the thinly veiled contempt it holds for those who are culturally different or **socially defined** as “weak” and “vulnerable” – have much in common with the anti-Semitism of Kafka’s own time. When I pointed this out to the author and informed him that the term he used to describe Kafka (“social degenerate”) was used by the Nazi’s to refer to the Jews, gypsies, Communists, and homosexuals of Europe not long after Kafka died, he seemed genuinely surprised. You should always try to interrogate your own assumptions and biases. Ask yourself: “what are the broader cultural and social implications of what I am saying?”

Another student wrote that, based on Kafka’s story “The Judgment,” she wondered if Kafka was gay. Kafka wasn’t gay. The problem with this statement, in a critical frame of reference, is that it lacks context. Kafka was not *literally* gay. There is, however, a lot of sexual subtext in Kafka’s writing. Sander Gilman, for example, has argued in his book, *Franz Kafka, The Jewish Patient*, that the subject of Kafka’s writing is the “Jewish body.” The Jewish body, for Gilman, is any body that is socially defined as “weak” or “vulnerable.” Feminine bodies, Jewish bodies, gay bodies. . . . These are all examples of socially vulnerable bodies. In this sense, in this context, an argument could be made that Kafka was writing a kind of “gay” body. But this is different from arguing that, literally, “The Judgment” is the writing of a “gay” Kafka (It is also important to point out that the word “gay” did not hold the same social-sexual meaning that it does for us today until the 1960’s).

I am not expecting you to write books like Sander Gilman (who is a famous academic and has been doing this his entire life). Most people, however, have *some relation* to criticism, just because they live in the world. For example, a student wrote a paper on “Report to an Academy.” The student compared his own experiences emigrating to the U.S. and going through a process of cultural assimilation as something analogous to that experienced by the ape in the story, and related this to the discussion of (lecture on) language that we had in the class. This paper was critical (in the best sense of the term), but also very personal. More importantly, it showed me clearly and vividly what the student was able to learn from the reading and the course lectures, combined with their own efforts and work.

Finally, it is important to remind you what the course syllabus has to say on the subject of critical writing. “Your essays must demonstrate *mastery of the reading material and course lectures* for the assignments (**your grade will be based on this**). *All essays must be critical. No grade will be awarded for non-critical writing.*” This is what my job requires me to do: to read your writing for style and content and grade it accordingly. Please keep this in mind in working on your essay/writing assignments.

A few simple rules to remember: Titles of books and films should be underlined or italicized. Titles of essays, articles, or stories should be put in quotation marks. You should always quote the text(s) read for the assignment(s) in question and provide page numbers for each quote. Excessive quotes are not acceptable. Do not write me simple plot descriptions, per the above (I’ve read and seen everything I teach, numerous times). I want to know what you think, what you’re learning. The assignments are a chance for you to share this with me.