

Critical Essay Writing @ National 5 & Higher

APP # 2



Writing a Critical Essay

What is a Critical Essay?

- A Critical Essay is a formal piece of writing.
- It is a structured response to a particular question on a text.
- You should use it to demonstrate your **understanding** of the whole text as well as your ability to **analyse** and **evaluate** relevant aspects of it.

What are Understanding, Analysis and Evaluation?

- These are the keys to doing well in a Critical Essay.

- **Understanding**



You show **understanding** when you make clear you know what is going on in the text; you know the story, you understand and can explain the message the writer is trying to convey etc.

- **Analysis**



Analysis is going deeper. This is when you show that you understand not only what the writer is saying, but also **how** it is said. You should aim to **analyse** how and why the writer uses techniques (language, characters, setting, plot etc) to convey their message.

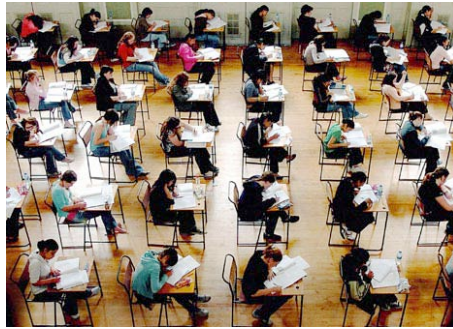
- **Evaluation**



Evaluation is all about you. Explain clearly how successful you think the writer has been in using particular techniques, in achieving their purpose, in engaging you etc.

Evaluation can only work if you explain and justify your opinion.

Answering a Critical Essay Question



Exemplar Questions

National 5 Specimen Question paper

1. Choose a scene from a play in which a character makes an important decision.

Say what causes him or her to make the decision and go on to show how the decision affects his or her actions in the rest of the play.

Higher Specimen Question paper

1. Choose a play in which there is a scene dominated by confusion, complications or uncertainties.

Explain the cause(s) of the confusion, complications or uncertainties, and go on to discuss the importance of the scene to your appreciation of the play as a whole.

Stage 1



- **The first sentence of every question is the gateway.**

National 5 Specimen Question paper

1. Choose a scene from a play in which a character makes an important decision.

Higher Specimen Question paper

1. Choose a play in which there is a scene dominated by confusion, complications or uncertainties.
- Reading this sentence should tell you whether you can answer the question.
 - If you are not sure whether this fits your text then move on to the next question.
 - Always choose the most straightforward question that you are most confident about answering.
 - Remember - all questions are worth the same number of marks.

Stage 2



The second sentence of the question is the actual question.

In the examples below it is in bold.

National 5 Specimen Question paper

1. Choose a scene from a play in which a character makes an important decision.

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1. Choose a play in which there is a scene dominated by confusion, complications or uncertainties.

Explain the cause(s) of the confusion, complications or uncertainties, and go on to discuss the importance of the scene to your appreciation of the play as a whole.

- This is what you have to answer in your essay.
- Often the question will give you an essay structure to follow. Watch out for this and make sure you follow it.

Structuring your Essay



Paragraph 1: Introduction

- Introduce the text and author
- Refer to the question and its keywords
- Have a clear line of thought / argument that is explicitly relevant to the question
- Be specific – briefly mention specific parts of the text you will cover in your essay
- Try to mention the central concerns, themes and techniques you will analyse – **but do not list them.**
- Don't say "in this essay I will ..."

Paragraph 2: Brief Summary (optional and not always necessary)

- Briefly summarise what happens in your text.
- Make sure you keep it to about **5** lines.
- This is the only part of your essay you're allowed to tell the story... so get it out of your system!

Paragraphs 3-7/8: Main Points

- You should have approximately 4-6 main points which will help you to answer the question.
- Start with a topic sentence or sentences. These will introduce what you are analysing, including a clearly explained context for your quote and a link to the previous point.

- Quotes. Always include clear explicit reference to the text. Be accurate. In drama and poetry, set it out as it appears in the text. Ensure the textual reference is relevant.
- Analyse the quote(s). Clearly explain the meaning and relevance to your purpose of the quote. Analyse any techniques it contains.
- Always refer to your opinion using the first person – do not use **you** or the reader etc.
- Discuss the central concern(s) of the text.
- In order to make sure that you demonstrate **understanding, analysis** and **evaluation**, you can structure your essay in any of the following ways:

S.E.A.L.



STATEMENT – this is your topic sentence or sentences. Use it to make your point. Introduce the important character/setting/scene and say why it is important.

EXAMPLE – quote a specific example or examples. You should give a quote as evidence in **every** genre.

ANALYSIS – analyse your example. Explain clearly and in detail what your example proves. Think about why you chose it and how the writer’s message is made clear.

LINK – link back to the **question** and the writer’s **central concerns**. Explain how you have used this point to answer the question. Make sure you give your opinion on how well the writer has conveyed his/her message through the character/language/scene you have focused on.

P.E.E.

- **Point** – make it clear what your point will be about. Link to the previous point and introduce your evidence.
- **Evidence** – one or more quotes
- **Explanation/Evaluation** – explain what your quote means, how and why the writer has used techniques and relate it to the question.

S.E.A.C.Q.

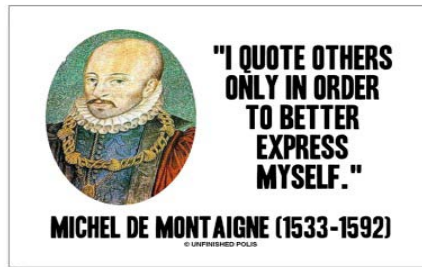


- **Statement** - introduce your point in these topic sentences or sentence. Explain clearly what your point will be about and try to link it to the previous point.
- **Evidence** – a quote or quotes. Remember to explain the context of every quote.
- **Analysis** - analyse and explain the quote or quotes. If there is more than one quote then analyse each in turn. Analyse how and why the writer uses the techniques they have.
- **Central Concerns** - aim to include analysis of how the central concern is shown by your evidence in some points. Do not do this in every point as it will become repetitive.
- **Question** – ensure that every point is clearly relevant to the question.

Final Paragraph: Conclusion

- Use this to round up your points – briefly summarise what you have said.
- Refer to the question and try to show how you have answered it.
- Give your overall opinion of the text and the writer's message.

Quotations



- Quotation is the best way of giving specific evidence to back up your points. Aim to have at least one quotation per point.
- A quotation **does not** have to be something a character says. It is merely a piece of text.
- Don't just throw quotations in, you need to introduce them and their context.
- Copy the quotation **exactly** from the text. If your text is poetry or drama, take a new line when the writer does.
- **Always** put quotations in inverted commas.
- If your quotation is only one line long, there is no need to take a new line.
Eg

It is clear that Joe and his class are bored by their teacher's attempts to inspire them. McCabe shows this in the words: "So we all sat there and yawned till the music was finished" (p23) Which clearly develop the idea that he is disinterested.

- If it is two lines or more, take a new line and indent. After the quote, start your analysis on the next new line.
Eg

Shakespeare makes us laugh at the witty exchanges between Beatrice and Benedick. One that is particularly amusing is the fast paced discussion at the masquerade ball when Beatrice pretends not to know she is dancing with Benedick:

Beatrice: Nor will you not tell me who you are?
Benedick: Not now.
Beatrice: That I was disdainful, and that I had my good wit out of the 'Hundred Merry Tales' – well, this was Signior Benedick that said so." (2:1:115-119)

In this example Benedick and Beatrice...

- After your quotation, write the following in brackets:
 - **prose** – page number. EG (p25)
 - **poetry** – line numbers. EG (12-15)
 - **drama** – act, scene and line numbers. EG (1:II:34-5)

Critical Essay Toolkit: Some General Tips



- Your writing should be formal and as correct as you can make it. Spelling, punctuation, grammar and paragraphing matter!
- Always write the title of the text in inverted commas.
- When referring to the writer, either use his/her **surname** or **both names**, eg Shakespeare or William Shakespeare. **Never** call him William!!
- It is ok to use the first person when giving your opinion. Evaluation is all about you, so bring yourself into it.
- **Never assert** – never make a point you cannot back up with evidence from the text. If you say a character is weak, you must give examples of this weakness and explain in detail why the writer makes him/her like this – how does it help convey the message?
- It is really important that you use your understanding of the text to answer the question. Don't just write down everything you know about the text. Keep it focused. **Answer the question clearly in every point.** Each of your main points should be chosen to help you to do this.
- Link your points. You can do this in the topic sentences (STATEMENTS) – eg:
 - One way in which Shakespeare helps me to understand the theme of love in “A Midsummer Night’s Dream” is in the relationship he creates between Hermia and Lysander.
 - Another tool Shakespeare uses to develop the theme of love is...
- Making a paragraph plan will help.

Sequencing Points



The way in which you sequence your points will very much depend on the question.

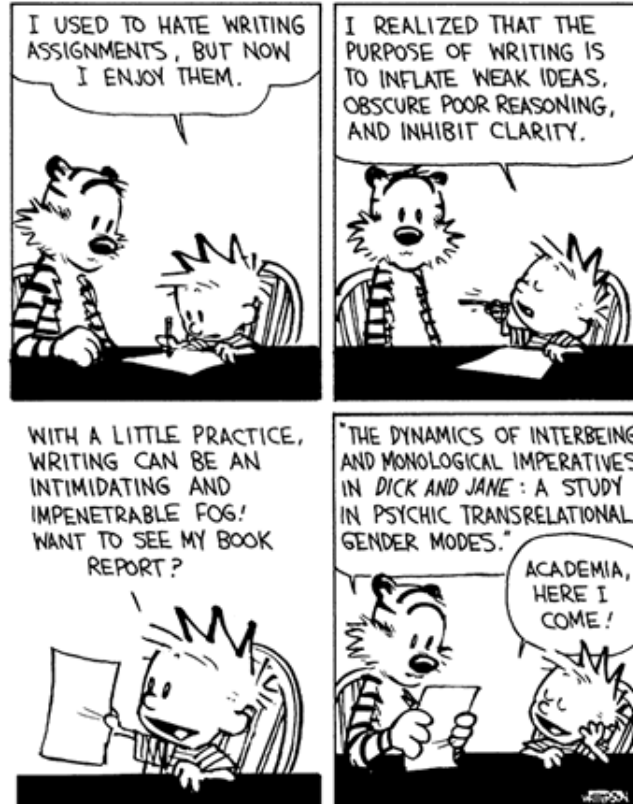
Key Scene Questions

If the question asks you to focus on a key scene and analyse its importance to the rest of the text, you should begin with a point on the key scene itself and then move through the different ways it impacts on the text as a whole.

Chronologically

It is often easier to work your way chronologically through a text. This is fine if:

- You do not just retell the story
- You forget the most important parts of the text
- You cover every Act in a play but fail to differentiate between the most important or climatic Acts and Scenes



Scene or Incident questions

Read the following National 5 Questions

- **Prose**

4. Choose a novel or short story which has a turning point or moment of realisation for at least one of the characters.

Briefly describe what has led up to the turning point or moment. Go on to show what impact this has on the character(s) and how it affects the outcome of the novel or story.

- **Drama**

2. Choose a scene from a play in which suspense or tension is built up.

Show how this suspense or tension is built up and what effect this scene has on the play as a whole.

Planning Scene or Incident Questions – Point 1

- Prose point 1 – describe what leads up to the turning point. Again remember this is still analysis. Include mention of characterisation, themes and central concern.
- Drama point 1 – explain how the tension or suspense is built up. Remember to bring in analysis of characters, themes and central concern.

Planning Scene or Incident Questions – subsequent points

- You have answered the first part of the question in your first point.
- The second part of the question asks you to analyse the effect this turning point **or** scene has upon the rest of the text.
- Your next points should analyse the rest of the text.
- Each point should refer to and analyse specific examples from the rest of the text **and** relate these to specific aspects of the turning point or scene.
- Therefore each point is likely to have at least 2 quotes