



Writing a Critical Essay

A **critical essay** (also called a **critique**) makes a careful analysis or evaluation of another piece of writing. Critical essays can agree or disagree with the subject of their critique, although they rarely do strictly one or the other. Rather, they point out strengths and weaknesses of the other author's arguments.

In this reading, we focus our attention on the critical essay. This reading will walk you through the process from reading an initial article, to brainstorming, to outlining, to researching, to writing the critical essay by letting you once again look over the shoulder of Maggie Durham, our Kaplan University student.

Step One: Read the Article

Prior to continuing this reading, you may wish to read the article that the sample outline and essay are critiquing. Go to the MasterFILE Premier database in the Kaplan Library and locate "Whatever happened to civics?" by Nicole Moore (leave out the "?" when you are searching).

Step Two: Brainstorm Reactions

After you have finished this reading and prior to reading on here, jot down a couple of things you thought the author did well and a couple of things you think could have been done better. For example, did the author fail to address any obvious counterarguments? What part of the article did you find most convincing? Which part least?

Maggie Durham, our student in this reading, had several immediate reactions that she jotted down:

- The author stressed that taking a class in government made students more knowledgeable about government, but isn't this just stating the obvious? A math class makes you better at math, doesn't it?
- I voted in 2004 election, but I didn't in the previous ones because, quite frankly, I'm young and the issues politicians were talking about weren't issues I cared about. Why should I care about a prescription benefit for Medicare or ending the estate tax for multimillionaires?
- It seems like the author thinks the cure to low voter turnout is just more civics education, but is a lack of civics the only cause of this problem? I thought poverty and race had more to do with it. The poor and minorities feel disenfranchised by a system that ignores them.

Step Three: Write an Outline

Were some of your brainstormed reactions in step two similar to Maggie's? Every critique is going to be different because every reader is going to have different reactions. We will now follow Maggie as she turns this brainstorming into an outline:



- I. Introduction
 - A. Thesis of the article being critiqued
 - B. Your thesis
- II. Point in original article
 - A. Your reaction to it
 - B. Evidence to support your reaction
- III. Point in original article
 - A. Your reaction to it
 - B. Evidence to support your reaction
- IV. Point in original article
 - A. Evidence to support your reaction
- V. Conclusion
 - A. Restatement of your thesis
 - B. Concluding remarks

Her first step and yours is to locate the thesis of the original article. Take a minute now to do so.

The thesis is the first sentence of the fourth paragraph: "It's clear, based on these and other findings, that policymakers and teachers must devote new energy to civic education." This will go in the I.A. slot. Why isn't it the last line in the first paragraph? This article is written in a journalistic style that has different conventions than academic style. When we get to Maggie's critical essay, you will see that she has adopted an academic style.

The next slot to fill in is Maggie's thesis. By using her prewriting brainstorming, she comes up with a good working thesis: *While civic education can increase youth voter turnout, increasing it alone will not radically raise the number of youth voters. Youth are compelled to vote or to abstain from voting for many reasons.* It is a "working" thesis because it may very well change and develop as she continues this process. This goes in slot I.B.

Turning back to the prewriting brainstorming, we can see that Maggie had already come up with three points she wished to react to. The next step is to go into the original article and find specific sections that state the original author's point so Maggie can react to these directly.

The first reaction Maggie had was: *The author stressed that taking a class in government made students more knowledgeable about government, but isn't this just stating the obvious? A math class makes you better at math, doesn't it?* Looking at the original article, find a section where the author did stress this.

Maggie chooses the excerpt: "[...] engaging courses in civics and government pique young people's interest in and aid their understanding of the American system" (Moore, 2003, p.32). This goes into slot II. What is Maggie's reaction to it? *While this is true and the author does a good job supporting this view, courses in any field aid the understanding of the students taking them.* This goes into II.A. Now Maggie needs evidence to support this reaction. There are two options: research and logic. Collecting



research from outside sources to support your point is the best way to proceed most of the time, but in this case a logical argument might work well. The author is stating something obvious, so Maggie's reaction for II.B is: *This is like saying taking math classes improves students' math abilities: we should all worry if this were not the case.*

Here is how Maggie's outline looks so far:

I. Introduction

A. "It's clear, based on these and other findings, that policymakers and teachers must devote new energy to civic education" (Moore, 2003, p.32)

B. While civic education can increase youth voter turnout, increasing it alone will not radically raise the number of youth voters. Youth are compelled to vote or to abstain from voting for many reasons.

II. "[...] engaging courses in civics and government pique young people's interest in and aid their understanding of the American system" (Moore, 2003, p.32).

A. While this is true and the author does a good job supporting this view, courses in any field aid the understanding of the students taking them.

B. This is like saying taking math classes improves students' math abilities: we should all worry if this were not the case.

She continues this process with her two remaining arguments:

2. *Even those youth who are educated about the American system may not want to be involved in the system because the politicians do not focus on issues youth feel affect them.*

3. *Voting rates are low among the poor and minorities, and so it may just be that those who have the opportunity to take a civics class are more often middle class or higher and white. These are the same people who would already vote or trust public officials.*

For these two points, Maggie needs more than logic to back up her argument. She needs to do some research. She goes to the Kaplan Library and starts doing keyword searches in MasterFILE Premier and Academic Search Elite. She tries phrases like *youth and voting*, *low income and voting*, *low voter turnout*, and *politicians and young voters* and pulls up several articles that look promising. She finds a good amount to back up her first point, but has a hard time with her second one. On the first point, she finds two pieces of evidence so she adds points 1 and 2 under III.B. She finds some evidence for the last point, but it's out of date (about the 1996 presidential election), so she puts it down but plans to continue looking.

What appears in her outline now may not be what appears in her final critique. She may stumble across evidence that is better. She may reorganize her points or rework them. All writing develops and changes as it goes through this process and yours will, too.

Here is Maggie's final outline. Note her title page and references page are in APA format (as yours should be as well):



Click [Sample Critical Essay Outline](#) to see the outline.

Step Four: Write the Critical Essay

Maggie turned in her outline and received some great feedback from her instructor. The instructor pointed out that Maggie's thesis, *While civic education can increase youth voter turnout, increasing it alone will not radically raise the number of youth voters. Youth are compelled to vote or to abstain from voting for many reasons*, was vague because it did not tell any of the reasons. After a few revisions, Maggie settled on *While civic education can increase youth voter turnout, increasing it alone will not radically raise the number of youth voters; politicians have to start paying attention to issues important to young people, and the role of socioeconomics has to be considered*.

The instructor also agreed that the evidence for point IV was out of date and suggested Maggie try to find information from the U.S. Census on voting rates and social class. Maggie went to the U.S. Census site (www.census.gov) and found quite a bit there.

Working from her outline, Maggie started to write her paper. What you see below was not her first draft. She wrote it, revised it, and gave it a final polishing proofreading. You will notice new evidence to support her points, an introduction that starts with a startling statistic to grab readers' attention, and a conclusion that drives the points home. Pay careful attention to the citation of outside sources throughout, both direct quotations and paraphrases. Note how even the article being critiqued is still cited. You must do this to avoid plagiarism.

Click [Sample Critical Essay](#) to see the critique.