

## Guidelines for Writing Critical Essays

**Thesis:** A good thesis statement is open to question. Someone can disagree with you, which is why you spend your paper defending your thesis. A bad thesis statement merely indicates a fact with which readers automatically agree.

**Bad:** In *Catcher in the Rye*, Holden Caulfield likes children but disrespects most adults.

**Good:** Salinger uses Holden Caulfield as a fulcrum in overturning the traditional concept of maturity, presenting children as sensible and adults as irresponsible.

**Rule:** Don't describe what happens in the story – that's a plot summary. Instead, explain what the author is trying to do with the story and why he or she does it – that's an analysis!

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### Outline:

#### 1. Opening paragraph

- A. Broad, introductory sentence(s) that introduces the reader to the general topic of your paper
- B. 2-3 topic sentences
- C. Thesis statement

#### 2. First argument (usually your strongest)

- A. Opening topic sentence
- B. 1-3 quotes from the original text
- C. 2-3 quotes from literary criticism
- D. Varied array of sentences tying the book to the criticism
- E. Transition sentence

#### 3. Second argument

- A. Opening topic sentence
- B. 1-3 quotes from the original text
- C. 2-3 quotes from literary criticism
- D. Varied array of sentences tying the book to the criticism
- E. Transition sentence

#### 4. Third argument

- A. Opening topic sentence
- B. 1-3 quotes from the original text
- C. 2-3 quotes from literary criticism
- D. Varied array of sentences tying the book to the criticism
- E. Transition sentence

#### 5. Conclusion

- A. Restate thesis in different words
- B. Summarize main points (also using different words)
- C. 1 final quote ← a nice touch!
- D. Concluding statement

*Example using the above thesis:*

*1<sup>st</sup> argument:  
Phoebe as an example of a child who Holden thinks acts sensibly*

*2<sup>nd</sup> argument:  
Mr. Antolini (or DB) as an example of an adult who Holden thinks acts irresponsibly*

*3<sup>rd</sup> argument:  
Holden is in between childhood and adulthood; as a result, he exhibits characteristics of both children and adults.*

**\*\* Avoid like the plague the following sentence openers:**  
“In my paper I will...”                      “I will write about (or prove)...”  
“I believe...”                                      “As you can see...”

## Analysis – Learn How and College will be E-A-S-Y

### The Five Whys...

How do you teach someone to analyze literature? You can deepen your understanding of a text by taking a general idea and asking any of the usual suspects -- who, what, when, where, why and how – but, of those, **why** and **how** are most important.

- Why does the author present a character in a certain way?
- Why does the author choose certain words over others? How is language used?
- Why does the author use a certain form of symbolism? (Note: it's not enough to say than an author uses symbols; you must analyze what it means to do so.)
- How does the setting function in the story?
- How does a character, or a plot event, or a relationship between two characters promote a theme?
- How does the structure of the text affect its content? (Or vice versa?)

This is more than plot summary, this is more than saying an author uses symbols; this is more than identifying themes...

### ***This is analysis.***

#### Examples:

*General Idea:* In *The Great Gatsby*, Fitzgerald illustrates the American theme of ambition.

Question: How? How does he illustrate it? Whom does he use as an example? What situations advance this theme for the reader? Why is ambition such a hallmark of American identity?

*General Idea:* Oedipus shows how arrogance can bring about one's downfall.

Question: How? How does the play show that? What are some events where Oedipus' arrogance has negative results? Why do you think he acts this way? How does Sophocles perpetuate Oedipus' arrogance to the point of his downfall?

*General Idea:* *The Canterbury Tales* are a cross-section of medieval society.

Question: How? How do the characters represent the different levels of society? What levels are represented? Who are prime examples of their respective social classes? Why is Chaucer doing this? What is he trying to say about the various social groups? What techniques does he employ in doing so?

The results of this questioning process may bring you to your ***thesis statement!***