

HOW TO WRITE **CRITICAL ESSAYS**

David B. Pirie



A guide for students of literature

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of literature

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Introduction

There are so many practical suggestions in this book that you are almost certain to find some of them useful if you want your essays to gain higher marks. But I am assuming that you want more than that. If you have no worthier aim than impressing your teachers, essay-writing will at best seem a bore. At worst it will induce panic.

The process of researching, planning and writing a critical essay can, and should, be enjoyable. If, at present, the prospect of such an exercise seems either dismal or daunting, that is almost certainly because you have not yet thought hard enough about your own aims in writing criticism. So this book will pose some of the questions which you need to ponder if you are ever to discover what is, for you, the purpose and pleasure in composing critical essays.

Such questions inevitably depend on larger ones about the value of literature itself. These in turn raise even trickier issues about language, the human mind and the social structures within which we live and think. Some sections of this guide outline some of the theoretical questions that you need to consider. In such limited space, I have been able to give only the briefest account of each, even of those questions to which entire books have been devoted. You may therefore find certain passages frustratingly simplistic or irritatingly partisan. Provided that you are then provoked into thinking out your own more subtle or balanced formulation, you will still benefit.

But if many of the ideas here are wholly new to you, you may find the brevity merely baffling. Persevere for a while. Many

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university teachers, including myself, find some of these issues uncomfortably challenging and you should feel no shame in having to progress carefully on such difficult terrain. Nevertheless, if you repeatedly get lost in one of the more theoretical sections, give it up for the time being and go on to read the rest of the book. You will find that even in sections discussing the most practical aspects of the essay-writing process, issues of broad principle are often raised, if only implicitly.

Whenever a critical technique – even one which, to the hasty glance of common sense, seems merely functional – is being deployed or recommended, major assumptions about the nature of literature and the purpose of criticism are being made. Any critical practice implies a principle. Since the most practical sections are designed to be clear and concise, I have sometimes had to give advice about methodology without spelling out the ways in which a particular method will make your essay tacitly support one set of assumptions rather than another. At many points, however, it has proved possible to indicate briefly some of the alternative theories which underpin different essay-writing styles. You may find that these passages, grounded as they are in specific examples of choices that the essay-writer must make, clarify those issues which had seemed to you elusively abstract when you first met them in one of the more theoretical passages. If so, you should eventually be able to return to such a passage and make more sense of it.

However diligently you read, or even reread, this book, it cannot provide you with a guaranteed recipe for the good essay. Anyone who tells you that religious observance of a few simple rules will ensure success is either a fool or is patronizingly treating you as one. Of course, there are many recommendations in the following pages which seem to me almost indisputably right and likely to have the support of nearly all literature teachers. Nevertheless, at many other points where, to save space and time, I must sound just as baldly prescriptive, your own or your teacher's preferences may differ from mine. Thoughtful critics have always disagreed about what criticism should seek to achieve and which methods it should employ. But the variety of approaches now being offered by scholars, critics and theorists, and the vigour with which their

debate is being conducted, are quite unprecedented. So at many points, this book will not give you unequivocal guidance. Instead it will help you to make your own definition of what constitutes a good essay.

Your confidence about that, like your skill in deploying your own choice of the various techniques discussed, is bound to be limited at first. It will grow only with practice. You will learn much from the advice of your teachers, the example (good or bad) of published criticism, discussion with your fellow students and, of course, your steadily deepening experience of an ever wider range of literary texts. Yet it will be the actual experience of writing essays which will teach you most about both the possibilities and the pitfalls of composing critical prose.

For such practice there is no substitute and this book does not pretend to be one. The chapters that follow cannot tell you what should be said about a literary topic. They can, however, help you to decide what you want to say and they will show you how to say it clearly in a style and format which your reader will welcome.

1 Facing the question

This chapter will be of most use when you have been given a specific question to answer. But even when you have been asked simply to 'write an essay on', you should find help here. Some passages will prove suggestive, as you try to think of issues that may be worth raising. Others will show you how these can then be further defined and developed.

Decode the question systematically

If you just glance at a set question and then immediately start to wonder how you will answer it, you are unlikely to produce an interesting essay, let alone a strictly relevant one. To write interesting criticism you need to read well. That means, among many other things, noticing words, exploring their precise implications, and weighing their usefulness in a particular context. You may as well get in some early practice by analysing your title. There are anyway crushingly self-evident advantages in being sure that you do understand a demand before you put effort into trying to fulfil it.

Faced by any question of substantial length, you should make the first entry in your notes a restatement, in your own words, of what your essay is required to do. To this you should constantly refer throughout the process of assembling material, planning your answer's structure, and writing the essay. Since the sole aim of this reformulation is to assist your own understanding and memory, you can adopt whatever method

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seems to you most clarifying. Here is one:

- 1) Write out at the top of the first page of your notes the full question exactly as set.
- 2) Circle the words that seem to you essential.
- 3) Write above each of the words or phrases which you have circled either a capital 'S' for 'Subject' or a capital 'A' for 'Approach'.
- 4) Place in square brackets any of the still unmarked words which, though not absolutely essential to an understanding of the title's major demands, seem to you potentially helpful in thinking towards your essay.
- 5) Cross out any word or phrase which, after prudently patient thought, still strikes you as mere grammar or decoration or padding.

Here is an example:

'We all of us, grave or light, get our thoughts entangled in metaphors and act fatally on the strength of them' (*Middlemarch*). Discuss the function of metaphor in George Eliot's work.

This might become:

[~~'We all~~] ~~of us, grave or light, get our~~ [thoughts] [entangled]
S
in metaphors ~~and~~ [act] [fatally] ~~on the strength of them~~
S
[(*Middlemarch*)]. ~~Discuss the function of~~ metaphor in
S
George Eliot's work.

The choices I have made here are, of course, debatable.

For instance, some of the words that I have crossed out may strike you as just useful enough to be allowed to survive within square brackets. Presumably, you agree that 'Discuss' adds nothing to the demands that any essay-writer would anticipate even before looking at the specific terms of a given question; but what about 'grave or light'? Might retention of that phrase help you to focus on George Eliot's tone, its range over different works, or its variability within one? Do metaphors play such a large part in signalling shifts of tone that the alternation of gravity and lightheartedness is a relevant issue?

And what about the phrase 'function of'? Clearly no essay could usefully discuss devices like metaphors without considering the way in which they work, the effect they have upon the reader, and the role that they play relative to other components in a particular text. Nevertheless, you might decide to retain the phrase as a helpful reminder that such issues must apply here as elsewhere.

You may wonder why '(Middlemarch)' has not been circled. The quotation does happen to be from what many regard as George Eliot's best novel but in fact there is no suggestion that your essay should centre upon that particular work. The title mentions it, in parentheses, only to supply the source of the quotation and thus save those who do not recognize it from wasting time in baffled curiosity. It does, however, seem worth retaining in square brackets. It will remind you to find the relevant passage of the novel and explore the original context. You can predict that the quoted sentence follows or precedes some example of the kind of metaphor which the novel itself regards as deserving comment. Less importantly, the person destined to read your essay has apparently found that passage memorable.

Deciding how to mark a title will not just discipline you into noticing what it demands. It should reassure you, at least in the case of such relatively long questions, that you can already identify issues which deserve further investigation. It thus prevents that sterile panic in which you doubt your ability to think of anything at all to say in your essay. If you tend to suffer from such doubts, make a few further notes immediately after you have reformulated the question. The essential need is to record some of the crucial issues while you have them in mind. Your immediate jottings to counter future writer's block might in this case include some of the following points, though you could, of course, quite legitimately make wholly different ones.

KEY-TERM QUERIES

'metaphors'/metaphor:

Quote suggests we 'all' think in metaphors but title concentrates demand on metaphor as literary device in G.E.'s written 'work': how relate/discriminate these two?

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How easy in G.E. to distinguish metaphor from mere simile on one hand and overall symbolism on other?

G.E.'s work:

No guidance on how few or many texts required but 'work' broad enough to suggest need of range. Any major differences between ways metaphors are used in, say, *Middlemarch*, *Mill on the Floss* & *Silas Marner*?

'work' does not confine essay to novels: use some short stories (*Scenes from Clerical Life*?)? Check what G.E. wrote in other genres.

How characterize G.E.'s use of metaphor? Distinguish from other (contemporary?) novelists?

HELPFUL HINT QUERIES

Middlemarch (quote):

More/less systematically structured on metaphors than other G.E. novels?

Find localized context of quote. What is last metaphor used by text before this generalization and what first after? Do these clarify/alter implications of quote?

'We all':

G.E. does keep interrupting story to offer own general observations. Metaphors part of same generalizing process? Or do metaphors bridge gap between concretes of story & abstracts of authorial comment?

How many of text's crucial metaphors evoke recurring patterns in which *all* human minds shape their thoughts? How many define more distinctive mental habits of particular characters?

'thoughts':

G.E. sometimes called an unusually intellectual novelist. What of text's own 'thoughts' in relation to those supposedly in minds of individual characters? Where/how distinguishable?

Text's more generalized 'thoughts' may not just illuminate plot & characters. They may be part of self-portrait by which it constructs itself as a personalized voice. Do they persuade us we're meeting an inspiringly shrewd person rather than just reading an entertaining book?