

Guidelines for Writing a Critical Analysis of a Primary Document

The process. In the process of critical analysis, a student closely examines a *single* text (in this case, a primary document) written by *a single author* in an attempt to understand *why* the author wrote the particular text, in a particular way, to a particular audience, and for what purpose. Thus, the student seeks to determine: 1) what the author argued or described, 2) how the author presented his/her argument or interpretation, 3) why the author chose that method of presentation and persuasion (in other words, what did *the author* view as the evidence and arguments that would most likely persuade his/her audience, what assumptions did the author expect his/her audience shared, and what assumptions did the author challenge), and 4) what the author ultimately hoped to achieve by writing the text.

A critical analysis might be considered the *first* step in reading a document that might *later* be used as evidence in a research paper. A student engaged in critical analysis probes for underlying assumptions, perceptions, values, and biases—elements that are present in all texts. Once the author’s perspective, method, and purpose have been identified, a scholar can determine how those shape the “evidence” (the author’s descriptions, ideas, concerns, arguments) that the text presented. Some texts present a “narrative” rather than a clearly defined argument. Yet even those texts are influenced by particular values and concerns, and most offer some message, whether implicit or explicit.

In the process of critical analysis, the student is not evaluating or judging the accuracy, the validity, the logic, or the persuasiveness of an author’s evidence, ideas, or interpretation. Since the student is not the author’s intended audience--the author was writing to an audience of his/her contemporaries--the analysis does not focus on whether the author has convinced the student of the argument and/or ideas presented, nor should the student search for present-day relevance in the text. Similarly, this is not a research paper. Instead of considering and using the information that the document contains as “evidence” to explore broader historical issues or contexts, the student’s focus stays squarely on the author and the text.

A critical analysis presents a careful examination of one author’s *rendition* of an event, an experience, an issue, an argument, or some aspect of his/her society. The analysis should not attempt to recreate the author’s *experience* or to establish whether the author was “representative” of his/her society. Indeed from one document alone you cannot make

such generalizations about either the author or the larger society. Finally, the student engaged in critical analysis attempts to determine how the author viewed and understood his/her society, rather than explore “the reader’s” perspective about or reaction to that society. The text itself does not provide evidence of how the author’s contemporaries read and responded to it. Rather than focusing on your reactions as a reader, *use your reactions as you read the text* to lead you to new questions about the author’s purpose and perspective.

The essay. Try to choose a text (a primary document) that has a clear argument or message. (While some primary documents offer intriguing evidence or insights into the writer’s thoughts or experience, these documents might be more difficult to subject to critical analysis.) After you have carefully read and analyzed the text, you should be ready to write the first draft of your essay. More than likely your first draft will be preliminary, for only in the process of writing do most students finally commit themselves to an argument and interpretation about the author and text. Indeed, as you write, you may find that your argument becomes clearer and more persuasive. In either case, you should revise the first part of your essay to reflect the discoveries you have made by the end of your essay.

Begin your essay with a sentence or two about the author, the date and title of the text, the occasion for which the text was written, and the general subject of the document. In a footnote or endnote, provide a full citation for the text (see below). You might offer a very brief statement about the author at the time during which the text was written. In your introductory paragraph, present a brief summary of your interpretation of the author’s perspective, method, and purpose in writing the text. The summary might contain a series of statements that lead up to your thesis statement. You do not need to describe the process of critical analysis; your essay should present the results of that process.

In the body of your essay, you may find that the most efficient and effective way to discuss and analyze the text is to move step by step through the text. After all, that is how the author intended the text to be read or heard. As you present the points that the author makes (offer quotations from the text as evidence for your discussion), begin to construct your analysis, and continue to build and develop your interpretation as your essay progresses. In your essay, **use the simple past tense** to describe what the author wrote: this serves to remind both you and your readers that the author wrote for an audience of his/her contemporaries. Whenever possible, **use sentence constructions with the active voice** rather than passive voice (the verb “to be”). Active verbs reiterate the author’s active

role in creating the text and the argument, and they encourage you to make connections and draw conclusions about the author and the text.

Citations. Historians use either footnote or endnote citations, following the *Chicago Manual of Style* format for Notes and Bibliography, rather than parenthetical citations and Works Cited pages. For most of the primary documents selected for critical analysis, the first citation of the source will contain reference information for two sources: the primary document and the collection (the secondary source) in which it is reprinted (see footnote 1 for example). The reference information for subsequent citations (e.g., quotations from the document) should be shortened, using the last name of the author of the document and an abbreviated title, followed by the page number (see footnote 2 for example). When you cite information or commentary written by the editor of the collection, cite that author and text (see footnote 3 for example). In general, place the footnote reference number at the end of the sentence; it should follow all punctuation marks (see footnote 2 above). If you need to provide a footnote in the middle of a sentence for reasons of clarity, place the reference mark at the end of a clause and its punctuation.

1. Mary Rowlandson, *The Sovereignty and Goodness of God . . . Being a Narrative of the Captivity and Restoration of Mrs. Mary Rowlandson* (Boston, 1682), reprinted in Charles H. Lincoln, ed., *Narratives of the Indian Wars, 1675-1699* (New York: C. Scribner's Sons, 1913), 122.
2. Rowlandson, *Sovereignty*, 125.
3. Charles H. Lincoln, ed., *Narratives of the Indian Wars, 1675-1699* (New York: C. Scribner's Sons, 1913), 120. (shorten for subsequent citations: Lincoln, *Narratives*, 120.)

For additional information on citations:

- [Chicago-Style Citation Quick Guide](#) from the Chicago Manual of Style
- Mary Lynn Rampolla, *A Pocket Manual to Writing in History*, 3rd ed.
- Kate Turabian, *A Manual for Writers of Term Papers, Theses, and Dissertations*, 6th ed.
- Diana Hacker, *Research and Documentation Online* (Bedford/St. Martin's Press).
- H-Net, *A Brief Citation Guide for Internet Sources in History and the Humanities*.
- Andrew Harnack and Eugene Kleppinger, *Online! A Reference Guide to using Internet Sources* (Bedford's/St. Martin's Press, 2003).