PREPARING THE CRITICAL/ANALYTICAL ESSAY

ATTACKING THE QUESTION AND DEVELOPING A STRONG THESIS
What Is a Critical/Analytical Essay?

- The idea behind critical analysis of literature is to write an essay that explains how a literary text demonstrates its themes.

- To write critically means to actually think about what a piece of literature means and find a way to express what it says to you. You must "consider" the work, form opinions about what you have read, and think about how the ideas in the work connect to the world in a larger way.
What Is a Critical/Analytical Essay?

- You will discuss **what a piece means** and **how it achieves its effect**.

- To write critically, you must provide **analysis** of specific points. You will explain how the events (quotes, actions, speech, examples, etc.) demonstrate themes and ideas.
What Are the Qualities of an Effective C/A Essay?

- In your groups, read the sample C/A essay on “The Destructors” and then address the following questions by writing on sticky notes:

  - What does the writer do that is effective in this paper?

  - Identify specific ideas, support, techniques, etc. that you think lead to a strong paper.
Note: The exemplar essay on “The Destructors” can be downloaded in the “Exam” section of the Wordpress site.
## CRITICAL/ANALYTICAL ASSIGNMENT RUBRIC

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<tr>
<th>Thought &amp; Understanding</th>
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**TOTAL = _____ / 30**
The Critical/Analytical Essay

- A typical critical/analytical paper is structured around a thesis. This controlling idea shapes your argument, and answers three important questions:

  - **What?**
    What claim are you making about the text?

  - **Why?**
    Why should we care? Answer the ‘So what?’ question.

  - **How?**
    How does the author develop this idea? What techniques does the writer use?
The Critical/Analytical Essay

- A thesis in a literary analysis is not a question, nor is it a simple statement of fact.

- A strong thesis will make a thoughtful assertion about a theme, and suggest both why this is significant, and how this idea is developed.
THE ROAD NOT TAKEN (Robert Frost)

Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,
And sorry I could not travel both
And be one traveler, long I stood
And looked down one as far as I could
To where it bent in the undergrowth;

Then took the other, as just as fair,
And having perhaps the better claim,
Because it was grassy and wanted wear;
Though as for that the passing there
Had worn them really about the same,

And both that morning equally lay
In leaves no step had trodden black.
Oh, I kept the first for another day!
Yet knowing how way leads on to way,
I doubted if I should ever come back.

I shall be telling this with a sigh
Somewhere ages and ages hence:
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I--
I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference.
The Critical/Analytical Essay

Sample Thesis

Robert Frost’s poem “The Road Not Taken” is thought-provoking. What do the roads represent—and why should we care?
The Critical/Analytical Essay

Sample Thesis

In “The Road Not Taken” Robert Frost implies that people will encounter significant challenges in life.
Robert Frost’s poem “The Road Not Taken” contains a good deal of symbolism which suggests important truths about facing challenges.
In his poem “The Road Not Taken,” Robert Frost tells us that taking a chance in life and moving away from choosing “safe” decisions can lead to a sense of incredible self-fulfillment. Frost uses powerful imagery and the symbolism of the crossroads to convey the notion that a person will ultimately face a challenging decision in life, and that accepting the challenge itself can be transformative.
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WHAT SHOULD I EXPLORE?

THE BASICS

Plot
Setting
Point of View
Character
Symbol
Metaphor
Irony

OTHER WAYS IN

Historical Context
Ideology & Marxism
Roles of Women
Personal Reader Response
Archetypes
PRACTICE ESSAY QUESTION:

Discuss the idea(s) developed by the text creator in your chosen text about the role self-perception plays when individuals seek to reconcile the conflict between illusion and reality.
Step #1: Define the Topic

In this first step, write out the given question in your own words. Use a dictionary to define the key words in the question.

**Example:**

Discuss the idea(s) developed by the text creator in your chosen text about the role of self-perception plays when individuals seek to reconcile the conflict between illusion and reality.
Step #1: Define the Topic

**SELF-PERCEPTION:**
- the act of understanding or perceiving an important truth about oneself
- insight; intuition; discernment; awareness

**ILLUSION:**
- a misconception; a fantasy; something not based on fact

**REALITY:**
- that which is real; authentic; actually happening
Step #2: Relate the Character

Relate the character(s) to the limited topic and generate a list of specific questions.

**Example Questions:**

- How does Miss Brill understand or appreciate her reality?

- Does Miss Brill have any kind of self-perception? Why or why not?

- Does she live in a world of illusion? Does she try to escape her world?

- What are the consequences of Brill trying to escape reality?
Actual Question: Discuss the idea(s) developed by the text creator in your chosen text about the role self-perception plays when individuals seek to reconcile the conflict between illusion and reality.

Limited Question: What does Miss Brill’s attempt to escape reality suggest about the conflict between illusion and her real world? Does her imagination enhance or cloud her ability to find happiness?
In this final step you will generate a specific thesis for your paper. Here you need to explain how the character is ultimately affected by the topic in question. Basically, you answer the *limited question*!

In “Miss Brill” Katherine Mansfield presents a chilling warning about how important self-perception is within a person’s life. Brill’s dependence on a false illusion to escape the realities of living abroad leaves her only more isolated and withdrawn—to the point she cannot face even mild acts of rudeness.
Step #4: Generate Thesis

Limited Question: What does Miss Brill’s attempt to escape reality suggest about the conflict between illusion and the real world? Does her imagination enhance or cloud her ability to find happiness?

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Katherine Mansfield presents a character in “Miss Brill” who immerses herself in a world of fantasy to escape the pain and loneliness of her real world. Because of her extreme dependence on illusion symbolized by her fur, Brill loses the ability to perceive important truths in her life, demonstrating the danger of avoiding harsh reality.
Step #4: Generate Thesis

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Because of her elaborate illusion she uses to escape her isolated reality, Katherine Mansfield’s Miss Brill is left even more removed from the real world. Through the juxtaposition of the Jardins Publiques and Brill’s own apartment, Mansfield demonstrates the extent of Brill’s delusion. By depending on the imagination to escape her difficulties, it only prolongs the inevitable moment of insight where she must acknowledge what is wrong.
The Introduction
The Introduction

Taken from a sample essay on Shakespeare’s Macbeth.
To equivocate is to speak “with equal voice”; that is, to utter words susceptible of two different meanings, generally with the intent to deceive. For example, a publisher might reply to a less than desirable writer by stating, “Dear Author, I have received a copy of your book and shall lose no time in reading it.” The message is ambiguous at best, and suggests two very different messages!

Does equivocation occur in *Macbeth*? Certainly. In fact, Shakespeare makes use of equivocation throughout much of the play to develop the central theme that appearances do not always match reality. From his first meeting with the three witches, to his final desperate moments of life, Macbeth becomes caught up in the double-play of language, and there is great irony in one of his final speeches where Macbeth exclaims, “[I] begin to doubt the equivocation of the fiend that lies like truth!” (V, v, 41).

The predictions of the three witches, and even more significantly, the prophecies of the three apparitions, all use carefully crafted language to lead Macbeth away from his own sense of right and wrong, and taken together, these equivocations demonstrate how thin the line is between what is real and what is but a false appearance.

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**Introductory Lead**

What technique will you use to enter into a discussion of the subject of your paper?

**Transition Line**

Move from the lead to connect the title and author of the literature on which you will focus your discussion.

**Thesis**

What is the controlling argument you will make about the story? What “Big Idea” are you putting forward?
THE POWER OF LANGUAGE: LIES, DECEPTION AND TRAGEDY IN MACBETH

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Introductory Lead Techniques:

- Personal anecdote
- A thought-provoking question
- A controversial statement or one that opposes your thesis
- A quotation from an outside source/thinker/text
- A sophisticated definition
- A metaphor
- An image or description of something connected to a subject in the text
The imagination can essentially be defined as the act or power of forming mental images of what is not actually present. It is a human faculty—indeed, it separates us from the beasts. And used temperately, the imagination provides individuals access to realms of impossibility where anything can and will happen, with no clear predication and/or consequence. I wish I were in such a place right now! Used creatively, the imagination can even provide a person with a means to escape the harsh realities of life. Here, the streams of consciousness are free of logjams like hate, or loneliness, or rejection, and the individual is able to feel at peace. Still, there is an inherent danger in depending on the imaginative faculty to escape one’s problems. Realists have railed against the imagination for centuries because of this fact, knowing that all problems inevitably must be faced in a direct manner. I think of Mr. Keating’s summary dismissal in Dead Poets Society by a realist school board, who determine the teacher’s fanciful ideas are “inflammatory” and “disobedient”. The imagination is ultimately deemed responsible for the tragic events that befall the school.

Katherine Mansfield implies a similar warning in “Miss Brill”, as the elderly protagonist’s imaginary world is completely shattered through one paltry comment. If a balance does not exist between fantasy and reality, a person may in fact intensify pre-existing problems, and risk falling prey to extreme feelings of angst and despair. Such is the insight for the observer of Miss Brill, as we discover her “grand play” is but a scheme to escape her reality of loneliness and ineptitude. Ultimately all people must face their own reality.
I have clear images of my own grandmother in her declining years. Wrinkled, fragile, and very much alone, my grandmother fiercely defended her right to live independently in her apartment on Edmonton Street in downtown Winnipeg. During my university years I would spend each Wednesday evening with this woman, eating dinner and playing games such as Tile Rummy and Scrabble. (I never won!) I know these evenings were important to her, as were other nights she spent with friends and other family members. How could they not? As an eighty year old widow living in what Carol Shields once called “the box before the box”, I worried my grandmother might be overcome by feelings of isolation and loneliness.

Such was not the case, and until her end I am confident my grandmother lived her life fully and actively—both in the physical and mental domains. She was what many would call “a dreamer”, and through her playful imagination, my grandmother became a master of tall tales and storytelling. Truly the imagination is a powerful faculty for escaping the doldrums of life, and used carefully, it allows individual like my grandmother to access to a rich and vibrant world much different from harsh reality. Perhaps, outside of my weekly visits, my grandmother’s imagination was another tool she used to add meaning and vitality to her life. Katherine Mansfield’s “Miss Brill” presents the story of a woman very much like my grandmother, a dreamer who precociously imagines herself as an essential element in the grand play of life. Unfortunately Brill’s fantasy is crushed, and the woman’s loneliness is intensified—all because she could not maintain that balance between imagination and reality. Through the crushing reality of Brill’s partial epiphany at the end of the story, Mansfield poignantly warns the reader that people must maintain a firm hold on the reality which surrounds them, and not try to escape such truths with imagination.
The Danger of Imagination: A Formalist Analysis of Katherine Mansfield’s “Miss Brill”

In the short story “Miss Brill,” Katherine Mansfield depicts an elderly woman who lives within a fantasy world created by her imagination. She resorts to her own inner thoughts to escape from the isolation and loneliness of her real world, and, by so doing, her life becomes interesting and fulfilling. In her fantasies she experiences a sense of contentment as she imagines herself as an important figure in other people’s lives, and as a person possessing a better life than those around her. Unfortunately, her fragile world is shattered, forcing her to face the gloomy reality of the life she truly lives. Her feelings of contentment and self-worth are precariously balanced on her faculty of imagination, and are destroyed once she realizes the emptiness and loneliness of her real world. The imagination has the power to enhance our lives, but when an individual removes him or herself too far from what is real, disaster and disappointment is inevitable. In Brill, we bear witness to a woman who fails to escape reality, and we experience the pathos of one who is truly alone.
Titles
Writers often omit or underuse the helpful tool that is an essay title. Feeling stuck, a student may give up on generating a title, or merely label their essays by assignment sequence (“Paper #2”) or task (“Critical Essay”).

A weak or non-specific title is a missed opportunity: titles help writers prepare readers to understand and believe the paper that is to follow. They can also help build your “Form & Structure” mark.
Quality Titles for Papers

A good title does several things:

• **First**, it predicts for your reader the content of your paper

• **Second**, it catches the reader's interest.

• **Third**, it contains keywords that will make it easy to access by a computer search.
Quality Titles for Papers

THE COST OF ILLUSION: A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF MISS BRILL

Creative

Focus of Essay
RECONCILING ILLUSION WITH REALITY: A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF KATHERINE MANSFIELD’S MISS BRILL
Quality Titles for Papers

THE COLD REALITY OF THE JARDINS PUBLIQUES: A FEMINIST ANALYSIS OF KATHERINE MANSFIELD’S MISS BRILL
OF FUR, HONEYCAKES AND TEARS: THE TRAGIC REALITY
OF KATHERINE MANSFIELD’S MISS BRILL
Structuring Your Argument
Because of her elaborate illusion she uses to escape her isolated reality, Katherine Mansfield’s Miss Brill is left even more removed from the real world. Through the juxtaposition of the Jardins Publiques and Brill’s own apartment, Mansfield demonstrates the extent of Brill’s delusion. By depending on the imagination to escape her difficulties, it only prolongs the inevitable moment of insight where she must acknowledge what is wrong and reconcile herself to the reality of her isolation.
Outlining the Argument

Because of her elaborate illusion she uses to escape her isolated reality, Katherine Mansfield’s Miss Brill is left even more removed from the real world. Through the juxtaposition of the Jardins Publiques and Brill’s own apartment, Mansfield demonstrates the extent of Brill’s delusion. By depending on the imagination to escape her difficulties, it only prolongs the inevitable moment of insight where she must acknowledge what is wrong and reconcile herself to the reality of her isolation.

I. Miss Brill’s Real World
1.  
2.  
3.  
4.  
5.  
6.  
 Clincher:

II. Brill’s Response to Isolation
1.  
2.  
3.  
4.  
5.  
6.  
 Clincher:

III. Character Foil
1.  
2.  
3.  
4.  
5.  
6.  
 Clincher:

IV. Brill’s (Lost) Epiphany
1.  
2.  
3.  
4.  
5.  
6.  
 Clincher:

Within each paragraph, ensure you include a specific reference to key words of the topic/question!
I. Miss Brill’s Reality

TS: Brill’s reality living as a foreigner and senior citizen in France is both harsh and isolating.

1. Unmarried; elderly; alone
2. Title helps suggest her anonymity (lack of first name)
3. Her isolation is compounded by her status as an foreigner living abroad in France; perhaps issues with language
4. Outside of teaching English pupils and reading to taciturn invalid gentleman, Brill is completely removed from true social contact
5. While Brill herself does not admit it, she lives in “a cupboard-like” apartment; symbol for her sad reality

CLINCHER: Brill compensates for her isolation and loneliness by depending upon her imagination—a world of illusion—to fill the void of interpersonal relations in her life.
II. Brill’s Response to Isolated Reality

TS  As an exceptionally observant woman, and one full of whimsy/play, Brill uses her imagination to relieve the boredom & monotony; symbolized by fur muffler

1. She has begun actively imagining she is part of a grand play, and as a central actress, she must go to the Jardins Publiques weekly to take part in the drama
2. Here she observes (eavesdrops) on people while sitting on bench; actively imagines they are all members of play; band plays accompaniment from the rotunda; even sky functions as an artificial backdrop; even stray dog is a “theatre dog”
   - even feels tingling she feels when donning her fur muffler, which she believes talks to her; evidence of highly active mind
4. She sees other lone figures on benches and judges them:
   - they are “still as statues”
   - like they have come “out of cupboards”

CLINCHER: Great irony in that Brill cannot “see” (perceive) the truth of her own situation--that she is simply repressing her sadness of being alone. (NB. She labels these emotions for others as something “gentle”, not “sad in her bosom”. The emotions are really HERS!)
III. Character Foil - Highlighting Brill’s Delusion

TS: Mansfield highlights Brill’s inability to reconcile herself to her reality of loneliness with the use of a character foil

1. The woman in the ermine toque is connected to Brill in the way she dresses, but also in way she uses imagination to overcome her harsh reality.

2. A gentleman in grey & woman in ermine toque appear in park:
   - lady resembles Brill in dress and age
   - after being rudely rebuffed by her man, the lady in the toque is able to use her imagination to pretend this insult never happened; it works!
   - She functions as a foil; a woman who knows the balance between reality and imagination
   - where Brill will suffer from using over compensating with her dependence on imagination, the ermine toque woman actually benefits and “saves face” (difference is in level of balance)

CLINCHER: Despite Brill’s obvious mental acuity, she cannot recognize the line between fantasy and reality. It is an inability to reconcile herself to the truth
IV. Brill’s (Lost) Epiphany

TS: Brill’s moment of possible insight & perception comes with boy and girl who sit on bench behind her (she calls them the “hero” and “heroine”)

1. They rudely mock Brill’s fur; boy states, “Why does she come here? Who wants her?
2. Brill’s eyes fill with tears: reader recognizes Brill desperately wants others to know and help her—yet her “play” does not bring her closer to acknowledging her own problems.
3. Brill is shattered; leaves and foregoes her customary honeycake with the almond to return to her “cupbard-like” apartment
4. Boxes up her special fur—symbol of her mind, now boxed in by her own delusions.
5. Thinks she hears something crying—reader recognizes it is Brill herself—a pathetic acknowledgment of her own bleak existence

CLINCHER: Irony is that Brill does not make this connection; her imagination has so warped her perception of reality that she has become disillusioned—and in fact even more afraid and alone.
Conclusions
Conclusion Strategies

• **Step One:** Restate the Thesis

• **Step Two:** Summarize
  
  Try to **SYNTHESIZE**, rather than simply repeat things stated in the paper. Show your reader how your points fit together.

• **Step Three:** Generalization
  
  Think of this as the “Big Idea”. What has the character learned? What has the reader or viewer learned? Why does this subject matter for your reader?
In his working life, Scrooge was certainly defined by his greed for money and his hatred of others, yet he changed to become one of the most generous and loving people of London. Where Scrooge is initially depicted as the ultimate miser in the way he conducts his business at his money-lending firm, he experiences a profound change due to his contact with the three ghosts of Christmas. Each of these spirits shows Scrooge the true meaning of life, especially the last spirit, who points at Scrooge’s grave. Charles Dickens’ *A Christmas Carol* shows that there is more to this world than money, especially when it comes to happiness. To be truly happy, a person must recognize the love of friends and family.