Criticism 1

Criticism is a form of argument. It is represented by a genre of scholarly writing—the critical essay—that is at the heart of literary studies as an academic discipline. This course, which is required of all English majors, is designed to help you to develop your skills as a writer of criticism.

Like other forms of writing, criticism is judged by readers on the basis of specific expectations and conventions. Just as readers do not expect mathematical formulae or computer code in a poem or a novel, they do not expect personal experiences or irrelevant extra-textual digressions in a critical essay. On the contrary, readers of criticism look for a sensitive argument—one defending a proposition about the message of a literary work or other text—that is based on the close analysis of the construction of the text.

Criticism 1 is described in the calendar as "[a]n introduction to strategies of reading, interpretation, and analysis of literary and non-literary texts . . . ." All preparation for effective criticism begins with a careful reading of the text: its words and sounds, structure and plot, figures and forms, audience and speaker, echoes and borrowings—its elements and construction, in short. Of course, many critical readers are thoughtful and emotional readers, too: they hold on to what they see and feel when they first read a text. But when it comes to formulating their interpretation of a work, critical readers provide evidence for their feelings and insights based on a careful analysis of the text's construction.

By learning to consider the whole range of textual elements used in the construction of texts, our criticism will, of course, more effectively persuade others of our point of view. But reading carefully is about more than making our criticism persuasive; it is about showing our respect to the writer of the text (and to the exact wording of what is said to us), and it is about our own satisfaction as readers, too. After all, just like a great painting, performance, or song, good literature enchants us with the beauty, mystery, and power of both its ideas and its construction.

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Course content and goals:

English 251A is an introduction to the method and craft of careful text-centred reading and to the persuasive verbal and written communication of such reading to others. In this section of Criticism 1 we will consider a wide array of exciting works, from all periods, by British, Irish, Canadian, American, African, Asian, and other authors working in English. The course will provide students with hands-on training in textual analysis, and in the canons of acceptable evidence for critical writing on literary texts.
The course has three main goals. On successful completion of the course, students will be able to:

- identify the building blocks of texts using accepted critical vocabulary;
- analyze the role of these building blocks in the construction of a text; and
- make persuasive use of textual evidence in a critical essay.

Class organization and format:

Class meetings of this section of Criticism 1 will function as a workshop. We will test and refine our individual reading skills and contribute to a team reading effort. Class time will be dedicated to practising the skills involved in critical reading, analysis, and communication (indeed, the course shares this emphasis on developing practical skills with other practice-based courses, such as creative writing seminars or studio arts classes). In addition to literary works, we will also examine some non-literary texts—including ads, music, cartoons, and perhaps some videos.

English 251A is required of all English general and honours degree students because the strategies of reading and analysis it introduces are central to the other English courses you will take over the next two or three years. The best way to meet the goals of the course is as an independent learner, practising the analytic strategies that you are introduced to in Criticism 1 in class, with a study partner, and at home.

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Logistics:

Contact Information:
Office: Hagey Hall 257; Phone: 888-4567, ext. 2416
Office hours: 4:00-5:00 Tuesday (in HH 257) and 1:00-2:00 Thursday (in HH 269), or by appointment

Required Texts:
Nancy R. Comley, et al., Text Book, 3rd ed. (Bedford/St. Martin’s)
M. H. Abrams, A Glossary of Literary Terms, 7th ed. (HBJ)
Course Packet (available by the second week of classes)

Recommended Texts:
Joseph Gibaldi, MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers, 5th ed. (MLA)
Assignments:

Attendance and active preparation for and participation in seminar discussions and exercises (10%); a 15-minute seminar presentation—a critical talk—on a text (20%); an in-class critical essay on a text (10%); a 3-page paper—a critical essay—on a text or texts (20%); and a final examination (40%).

Students ARE REQUIRED to prepare course readings ahead of the relevant seminar meeting AND to participate in class discussions and exercises. Seminar exercises will include the analysis of a magazine advertisement (subject to peer assessment) and regular breakout groups on the five textual perspectives of speech situation, figuration, intertextuality, narration, and rhythm (a sign-up sheet for the breakout groups will be circulated in the second week of classes). Seminar presentations (in groups of two) will be scheduled for dates throughout the semester (a sign-up sheet will be circulated in the second week of classes; texts will be assigned one week prior to presentation dates for the sake of fairness, so that all presenters have the same amount of time—one week—in which to prepare).

The in-class critical essay will be written on October 10. The paper MUST be handed in to the instructor at the start of class on November 14. Due to my responsibilities as Undergraduate Officer and other factors such as class sizes, I am not able to mark papers handed in at other times. For this reason, papers handed in before, during, or outside of the November 14th class, in the absence of a serious personal medical reason, will be graded F-. Papers must be typed, double-spaced, and fastened with a staple (DO NOT use plastic report folders or other fasteners or covers); if using a word-processor, laser print your paper and do not use right justification. A page is 250 words. Papers must follow the format laid out in the MLA Handbook, 5th ed. Uncompleted assignments will be graded F-.

Finally, it is expected that students will follow at all times both university and department regulations on plagiarism (in particular, all work apart from group assignments must be your own, and the words and ideas of others must appear within your work inside quotation marks and with complete citations in foot- or end-notes).

NOTE: Please keep a photocopy of any paper you submit, and NEVER hand a paper or any other work in by sliding it under (or sticking it to) my office door.