

Essay critiques—

As I say in the syllabus, “for each of your classmates’ seminar papers, you’ll be asked to provide a written critique of approximately a page, turned in by 10:00 a.m. of the day the essay will be workshopped in class. These critiques should not be blandly congratulatory, nor should they be needlessly critical. Think of what kinds of suggestions you might find helpful on your own writing, and try to provide them. What professorial comments have been particularly useful to you in the past? What do you think the writer is trying to say, and does s/he do so? What needs clarification, support, reorganization? Where might the writer take the essay, to make it better?”

You might want to break things down thusly:

What do you think of the basic idea of the essay? The critical questions it’s asking, and attempting to answer?

- Does the topic seem either too slight or too huge for an assignment of this length?
- Are the questions the writer is asking *worth* asking, at a disciplinary level? That is, are they the kinds of inquiry that’s relevant to literary study?
- Does the paper have an identifiable thesis? Is it clear? Is it nuanced?

How well does the writer develop and support his or her idea?

- Are secondary sources brought in in a helpful manner, or does their inclusion seem forced?
- Does the writer clearly articulate the connections between her secondary sources and her own ideas?
- Does the writer provide adequate textual evidence, from one or more works we’ve studied this term, to support his arguments?
- Are the passages he quotes explained and interpreted adequately?
- Is there a logical flow through the essay? Are there places where transitions need to be improved upon? Should sections be reordered?
- Are all sections of the essay equally developed, or have some received short shrift? Are some too long?

How good is the writing?

- Does the writer use coherent paragraphs? Some things to look for:
 - one idea per paragraph, and one paragraph per idea;
 - declarative sentences that tell the reader what the paragraph is about—what part of the paper’s overall argument it will be addressing.
- Is the writing grammatical at the level of the sentence? If not, what kinds of errors should the writer be looking out for?
- Is the writing too jargony?
- Is the prose clear and pleasant to read? Graceful, as well as informative?

You don’t have to answer every one of these questions for each essay—you wouldn’t have space or time enough. But try to hit on each of these three basic categories, and identify the things that—being improved upon—could most improve the paper. Feel free to note, too, what works *well*—it’s good for morale.

And finally, for our in-class discussions, think about what questions the essay leaves you with. What do you, as a reader, still want to see answered? What’s unsatisfying?