Guidelines for Papers

A writer’s job is sticking his [or her] neck out.
Sloan Wilson

The art of writing has for backbone some fierce attachment to an idea.
Virginia Woolf

Critical Analysis:
What, exactly, is a “critical analysis,” anyway? You may have attempted a critical analysis of a text in the past, only to be informed by your teacher that you have engaged in “plot summary.” How, you may ask, can you analyze a text without discussing the plot? And if you discuss the plot, it seems you’re immediately guilty of “plot summary.”

There is a way out of this muddle. John Trimble, a writing teacher at the University of Texas at Austin, suggests the following analogy to help clarify the difference between a plot summary and a critical analysis:
The difference between a plot summary and a critical analysis is analogous to the difference between (a) an account of the highlights of the Vietnam War and (b) an explanation of how the United States happened to get into it, why we stayed in it, and what its effects have been on the American and the Vietnamese people. A plot summary begins with no thesis or point of view; it merely recapitulates the facts. A critical analysis, on the other hand, takes a viewpoint and attempts to prove its validity; its object is to help the reader make better sense of something with which she is already familiar. Critical analyses are types of expository papers. Exposition is a setting forth, an act of explanation. The expository writer’s primary job is to explain; her secondary job is always to persuade. As an expository writer in this class, you will attempt to forward a position about a text, and then explain and demonstrate to your readers, using carefully arranged and presented evidence, that your position on this text is valid. In doing so, your role in this course will shift from that of a reader to that of a critic. The critic’s job is to explain and to evaluate -- that is, to bring the reader to a better understanding of a subject or text.

The Thesis Statement:
The most critical structural difference between a plot summary and a critical analysis lies in the paper’s thesis statement. Your thesis statement will contain the main argument, position, or point you wish to assert about a text. Rather than merely stating an obvious fact about the text, texts or issues addressed, a strong thesis statement will be both contestable and somewhat plausible, both bold and interesting. Such a thesis statement will forward an argument about the text that is not obvious -- one that is narrow and specific enough to qualify as your own interpretation of the text -- and the essay will attempt to prove the validity of this thesis through the careful and persuasive arrangement of evidence from the text. Such a contestable thesis statement will be better simply because it may not necessarily be true, and will reflect your own unique response to the text. (This type of thesis statement is sometimes referred to as a “risky” thesis statement.)
because it attempts to alter the reader’s perspective on an issue or text, and because it is not obvious or incontestable; rather, one could easily point out reasons why it might not be true.) As a writer, you will have to prove that your assertion is true through a careful presentation of quotations from the text. Your thesis statement should always be assertive; you are attempting to demonstrate and prove to your readers that your own, wholly unique, interpretation of the text is correct, valid, and worthy of serious consideration. Your thesis statement should, therefore, be narrow in scope, bold, unique, assertive, genuinely interesting, and specific.

The Body:

The body of your essay will serve as a logical and coherent series of sub-assertions which will prove that your thesis is, indeed, valid. Like a defense lawyer, the burden of proof lies with you; and, like a good defense lawyer, you will assemble, present, and explain concrete evidence from the text(s) to support your position. Every assertion you make in your text must be proven with concrete examples, in the form of direct quotations from the text. If you do not include such evidence in your paper, the readers, like a skeptical jury, need not believe you. In your efforts to make your case convincing, you may find yourself drawing on many details of the plot, but, unlike the mechanical plot summarizer, you will always be using those details to demonstrate a point. In other words, it is their larger significance that always concerns you, not the details for their own sake. They are illustrations of something -- a recurring pattern, a character trait, a thematic authorial position, or whatever.

Paper Format:

Your paper should be, roughly, within the suggested page limits. A significantly longer paper will probably be unfocused and unwieldy; a significantly shorter paper will probably not be adequately proven or developed. Page limits assume 250 words per page; if your font is particularly small or large, vary your page length accordingly. Papers should be typed, double-spaced, and should have one-inch margins. Include a captivating title and a heading on the first page or on a title page.

Using Sources:

Quote the text(s) frequently, and use standard MLA documentation in your paper (parenthetical documentation which includes the author’s last name and the page number, or simply a page number if you are responding to only one text or if the author’s name is mentioned in the sentence). Never leave a quotation alone in your paper; always include quotations within your own sentences.

Quotations which will be longer than three typed lines of your paper must be indented on both sides of the margin, and single or double spaced. Introduce such indented quotations with a colon instead of a comma. Write about the events of a work of fiction in the present tense.
Legitimate Use of Sources:

The paper you write must contain your own thought and be in your own words. In determining how to use quotations (textual citations) correctly, follow these two basic rules:

1) Any time you quote directly from an author, you must (i) use the author’s exact words; (ii) enclose them in quotation marks; and, (iii) give a reference to the source, including the page number where the quoted words appear.

(Note that you need not include the author’s name if you are working with only one text.) If you wish to leave out some words in a quoted sentence, use ellipses to indicate the omission. If you wish to insert words or punctuation into the quotation to make the quotation conform to your own syntax, use brackets around the added words or punctuation.

2) If you use any ideas or other information from a text, or if you simply paraphrase the plot, ideas, or events of a text (i.e. relate the ideas or the plot of a text in your own words), you still must provide documentation to indicate your source for this information.

Carefully review “The Correct Use of Borrowed Information,” located on the Winthrop English Department’s Web Page. You will be responsible for the content in this document.