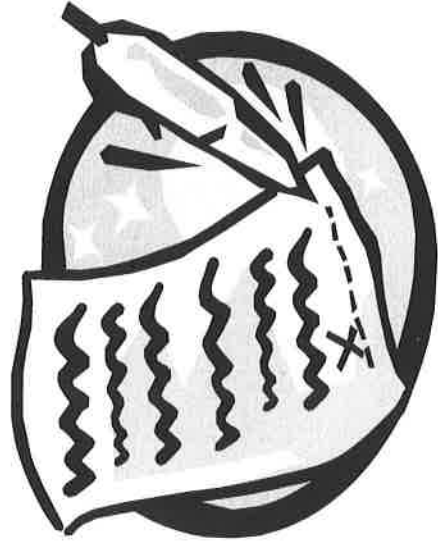


CRITICAL ESSAY WRITING!!



Essential Exam Advice

1. Prepare three texts: not three essays.
2. When referring to poetry regard two poems as one text ensuring they are thematically linked.
3. Similarly, with short stories prepare two, which are thematically linked.



Examination Preparation

- When preparing critical essays prepare notes thoroughly, then practise responding to different types of question.
- In note taking cover all the major areas of a text, for example:

Critical Essay Preparation

For drama questions cover:

- Key act or scene
- Theme
- Conflict
- Characterisation
- Dialogue
- Any other feature such as symbolism or sound/lighting

Critical Essay Preparation

- For prose questions cover:
- Characterisation
- Plot events and climax
- Narrative voice/stance
- Theme
- Setting [time & place]
- Language features including motif & symbolism

Critical Essay Preparation

For poetry questions cover the following for two poems written by the same poet:

- Imagery & other language features
- Tone/mood
- Form or structure
- Symbolism
- Persona
- Punctuation
- Theme

For the final examination

Once notes are thoroughly prepared the following should be undertaken:

- Memorise the introductions with the exception of the reference to the question, for obvious reasons.
- Memorise your quotations ensuring your quotations refer to the main features of each genre.
- Practise critical essay writing!

In the Final Examination

- Once you have chosen your essay questions write down your introductions keeping in mind to adjust the reference to the question.
- Write down your quotes on a spare piece of paper and begin.
- If you forget a quotation refer to the scene, the idea or the point you wish to make.

Responding to the Essay Question

- In each section, a box, a prelude, will appear at the top above the questions.
- The contents of these boxes will be fairly similar for the different sections.
- When choosing a question, you should read the questions with great care, then return to the box at the top to select the techniques you will focus on.

Presentation of Questions



- A prelude for the drama section might read something like:
- In your answer you must refer closely to the text and to at least two of: conflict, characterisation, key scene, dialogue, climax, setting, aspects of staging

Presentation of Questions

- ...which will be followed by:

Choose a play in which there is a scene which provides a clear turning point in the drama.

Explain why it is a turning point and go on to discuss the importance of the scene to your appreciation of the play as a whole.

Presentation of Questions

A prelude to the prose fiction might read:

You must refer closely to the text and to at least two of: characterisation, climax, theme, setting, narrative perspective, plot event or any other appropriate feature.

Presentation of Questions

...which will be followed by:

Choose a novel which caused you to reconsider your views on an important human issue.
Explain what the issue is and go on to discuss how the writer made you reconsider your views.

Beginning Your Answer

After thoroughly reading and choosing your questions and after writing down your introductions and quotations tackle your first question by underlining the most pertinent points of the question. This will...

- Focus your mind to what is relevant;
- Set the parameters of your line of argument;

Beginning Your Answer

Answers to questions on prose fiction should address relevantly the central concerns/ themes of the text and to at least two of: characterisation, climax, theme, setting, narrative perspective, plot event and any other appropriate feature.

Choose a novel which caused you to reconsider your views on an important human issue.

Explain what the issue is and go on to discuss how the writer made you reconsider your views.

Introduction

There are two main ways of introducing a critical essay, but whatever style you prefer the following must be included:

- Title
- Author
- Plot Summary
- Reference to the question

Exemplar One

“One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich”, written by the Russian author Alexander Solzhenitsyn is a revealing novel, depicting the terrible conditions of the Russian gulag in the reign of the dictator Joseph Stalin. We follow the character of Ivan Denisovich, known as Shukhov, who has been wrongly imprisoned in one of Russia’s gulags for political prisoners. I intend discussing how the author uses setting and characterisation to help the reader explore the theme of the abuse of absolute power and its impact on human behaviour.

Exemplar Two

Alexander Solzhenitsyn reveals to us the abuse of power shown by Joseph Stalin's dictatorship through the novel, "One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich". The author himself spent time in one of these gulags and so knows how dreadful the conditions were. Ivan Denisovich or Shukhov has to survive through the drudgery of hard labour, the deadly cold and the capricious guards who, at a whim can decide his fate and that of any prisoner. Shukhov shows us how he survives by eating his food to a pulp to maximise his nutrition, what he does to gain additional rations and by working intensely to keep vitally warm. At the end of the day Shukhov goes to bed knowing tomorrow could be his last. The novel is divided into three episodes: during morning reveille, the working day and the return from work. The second episode contributes very importantly to the ideas of the story and is crucial in my exploration of the novel.



Exemplar Three

“The Guardians” is an intriguing novel set in the year 2057, written by John Christopher. Opening in an underfunded and ravaged London, Rob Randall is shocked to discover his father has mysteriously died. He is sent to a savage boarding school, but after much taunting and bullying, he is compelled to escape on a voyage of uncertainty across the legendary barrier to the rural setting of the County, where he is befriended by the Gifford family and shielded from the inquisitive gazes of the Guardians. However, events soon spiral out of control and Rob finds himself in the midst of a brutal revolution, and he must consider the possibility that the perfect society of the County is not all it seems. The author, John Christopher, uses literary devices such as plot and features of style to develop excitement, tension and suspense.

It is imperative you become critical thinkers so that you can evaluate and correct your own work!

What do you think of this introduction?

Topic Sentences

1. Topic sentences should identify clearly the point[s] of the paragraph.
2. Topic sentences may set the context for the point[s] made such as specifying which verse, scene, chapter or episode the point is taken from.
3. There is no room for generalisation or repetition.

Topic Sentences

- **Exemplar One**

Christopher's underlying message in the novel is to convey the similarity of our society today to that of the Conurb and he uses language techniques to portray, in particular, how manipulated the common person is by a machiavellian government:

Topic Sentences

Exemplar Two

In the second episode the paradoxical theme of prisoners experiencing a sense of freedom was conveyed through the characterisation of Shukhov where he was shown to be industrious and intelligent.

Topic Sentences

Exemplar Three

John Christopher uses successfully language techniques such as assonance and alliteration to create a sense of chaos and shattered peace in the climax of the novel when the revolution has just begun in the traditional setting of the County:

Appropriate Quotations

Exemplar One

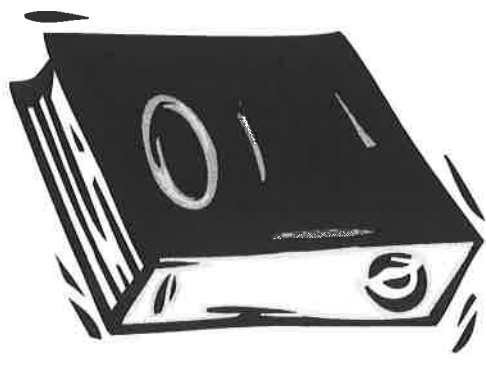
Christopher's underlying message in the novel is to convey the similarity of our society today to that of the Conurb and he uses figurative techniques to portray, in particular, how manipulated the common person is by a machiavellian government:

“He had looked around and seen the stagnation and rottenness festering under the elegant surface of the life he knew: the corruption that could manipulate people like puppets, and the acquiescence of the puppets in their silken bonds.”

Exemplar Two

In the second episode the paradoxical theme of workers experiencing a sense of freedom was conveyed through the characterisation of Shukhov where he was shown to be industrious and intelligent.

“And then every thought swept out of his head. All his memories and worries faded. He had only one idea – to fix the bend in the stove pipe and hang it up to prevent smoking.”





Exemplar Three

John Christopher uses successfully language techniques such as assonance and alliteration in the climax of the novel to create a sense of chaos and shattered peace when the revolution has just begun in the traditional setting of the County:

“...confusion there, with servants dashing about in different directions...”

Quotations should be pithy and succinct. In other words they should be brief, contain sound language techniques and/or have stylistic value and demonstrate the point[s] made in your topic sentence[s].

It is advisable to vary the openings of the sentences which follow your quotations.
The following are expressions you may find useful:

The above reference suggests

This quote demonstrates

The statement above illustrates

The above extract describes

The reference indicates

The extract portrays

The quote reflects...proves...conveys...reveals...

Other useful expressions are:

- ... is an emphatic exclamation that...
- ... is a subtle suggestion revealing...
- ...such inferences reveal that...
- ...this reflects the author's attitude regarding...
- ...the complexity of which cannot be underestimated...
- ...this literary device functions as...
- ...this literary technique functions on a number of levels, for example...
- ...is a clear demonstration of the fact that...
- ...this is an illustration of the author's attitude to...
- ...the use of such language has the purpose of ...

Developing Analysis & Evaluation

John Christopher uses successfully language techniques such as assonance and alliteration to create a sense of chaos and shattered peace in the climax of the novel when the revolution has just begun in the traditional setting of the County:

“...confusion there, with servants dashing about in different directions...”

The above reference reveals the author's use of alliteration to suggest the speed of the servants as they struggle to prepare for the sudden rebellion in the County. Their lack of preparation gives the impression that the ways and rules of the County have never been challenged, and thus increases the tension for the reader because it is not known if the revolutionaries will overthrow the Guardians. This idea is developed by another language technique of assonance in, “different directions”, which gives the impression of confusion by the servants who are running around the house trying to prepare defences from the pending onslaught, but don't quite know what to prepare. Such a situation creates tension as mentioned above and of course if readers did empathise with the protagonist then they might be more inclined to sympathise with the plight of Rob who had just escaped a hazardous life in the Conurb for a settled one in the County.

Exemplar Two

Christopher's underlying message in the novel is to convey the similarity of our society today to that of the Conurb and he uses figurative techniques to portray how manipulated the common person is by a machiavellian government:

“He had looked around and seen the stagnation and rottenness festering under the elegant surface of the life he knew: the corruption that could manipulate people like puppets, and the acquiescence of the puppets in their silken bonds.”

Within the reference above, Mike, a youth from the County who perceived the Conurb as a preferred society, discovers all is not what he expected it to be. The “elegant surface” that covers the society of the Conurb is one which is appealing and impressive, but of course underneath lies the perverted government known as the Guardians, controlling, supervising and determining the lives of naïve citizens. Simple lexical choice such as “festering” communicates the idea that life in some sense is diseased and is destined to crumble. The revelation of the corrupt nature of the government changes the perspective of earlier incidents in the novel such as the riots at the sports games. This creates a sense of enjoyment and interest for the reader, because the extent of the government's power is mysterious, but of course it is suggested that it is extensive because the simile compares the populace to puppets who have no individuality and are living a life not worth living. The effective lexical choice of “acquiescence” portrays how willing, desperate and dependent the Conurbans lives are, which may be a comparison to our society today where it may be argued we allow ourselves to be manipulated.

In the second episode the paradoxical theme of workers experiencing a sense of freedom was conveyed through the characterisation of Shukhov where he was shown to be industrious and intelligent:

“And then every thought swept out of his head. All his memories and worries faded. He had only one idea – to fix the bend in the stove pipe and hang it up to prevent smoking.”

The metaphor “swept” suggests any worrying thoughts Shukhov might have had, have quickly disappeared during his involvement in work. Instead of futilely worrying about his plight he becomes fully concentrated on his work without complaint. It seems he takes a pride in his work. Hard labour is supposed to be a punishment from the authoritarian power but Shukhov is applying himself to this project like he would if he were dedicating himself to a job outside the camp. It seems he is actually enjoying it. It is a paradox that prisoners who commit themselves wholeheartedly to each task discover a sense of freedom even though they are enslaved to hard labour. This is a great emotional and psychological boon, and furthermore, it reveals that if humans concentrate so deeply on something they can escape any confines whatsoever. On a practical level Shukhov gains warmth from his activity and a sense of pride and this is a personal triumph over the authoritarian power.

A good guideline from which to work is as follows:

1. Analyse and evaluate the language techniques and stylistic qualities contained within the quote.
2. Develop such analysis to discuss in detail the point[s] made in your topic sentence.
3. Expand your discussion to what you believe to be the author's intentions.
4. Create a link with your next paragraph.

Critical Essay Fluency

A Critical Essay is about developing an argument, developing a stance in response to the particular demands of the essay question. Therefore it is useful to use such language as:

However... furthermore... consequently...
in addition... this reinforces...

which complements this point... this point is developed by...

more significantly it could be argued...

This can be taken further by developing links between one paragraph and the next. This is achieved by creating linking sentences at the end of one paragraph to link with the following paragraph. For example:

So far, I have shown that Solzhenitsyn employs the omniscient narrator as the conscience of mother Russia and in this sense the writer develops the idea that the narrator is an objective observer to the activities of the prison camp.

Write a topic sentence which would follow the above linking sentence.

This point is developed with the use of third person narrative when an objective account is given in the first episode of the novel when the narrator describes the subhuman and impoverished conditions of the barracks.

This, however, is not the only factor explaining why Shukhov helped his fellow prisoners. It may be suggested that he understood that the preservation of his own humanity necessitated his supporting of others.

Write a topic sentence which would follow the above linking sentence.

Shukhov realised by helping others he maintained his own dignity and humanity, therefore we could argue that his actions were paradoxically altruistic and selfish at the same time. For example he gave Tsezar advice on how to take care of his additional food rations he received by parcel knowing that he would benefit by receiving a reward.

This raises another interesting aspect to the novel, because it is unusual how minor revelations brought about by the literary device of anecdote could reveal the barbarism of Stalin's Russia.

Write a topic sentence which would follow the above linking sentence.

Anecdote is used periodically throughout the novel and specifically to reveal the biographical background of important characters and in doing so it reveals the socio-political context to their lives. For instance, it is revealed that Shukhov was imprisoned as a spy after escaping capture from the German forces and returning across their lines to the Soviet sector, which shows how insecure, paranoid and belligerent the government was.

Conclusion

A good conclusion should include the following:

1. Reference to the essay question
2. Summarise main points
3. Identify what you felt summed up the style or theme of the piece of literature.