

Guidelines for Writing Critical Analyses of Screenplays

Manuscript Guidelines:

Your critical analysis papers should be:

1. Five to eight pages in length, no more than ten. (This paper length suggests you should write directly and concisely and not get off topic. Make your point, then move on to the next. Don't digress, unless the digression is important.)
2. Double-spaced.
3. Written in a standard twelve-point font (**Courier** or **Times Roman**).
4. Written in the "literary" present tense, as if the events are occurring now. ("Colonel Fitts *kisses* Lester Burnham" not "Colonel Fitts *kissed* Lester Burnham.")
5. Based upon your own *original* observations about a *specific* screenwriting technique as it applies to a *specific* script of your own choosing. (Set ups and pay offs, book ends, flashbacks, and so on.)
6. Not based upon other sources you've read. (In other words, this *isn't* a research paper, and you shouldn't rely on outside sources. I'm interested in your *own* original observations about the script you've chosen to write about.)
7. Given a *focused* and *specific* title: "Set Ups and Pay Offs for Colonel Frank Fitts' Homosexual Homophobia in *American Beauty*" (Please don't put quotation marks around your *own* title. Script titles are *italicized*.)
8. Paginated.

Before I define *critical analysis* and describe a few approaches to writing your Critical Analysis of Screenplays essay, let me make clear up front what ***I DON'T WANT YOU TO WRITE***:

1. **Plot Summaries**, which
 - a. Simply tell (or show) us what happens in a script (as with your dramatized summaries). (Colonel Frank Fitts, a violent homophobe, kisses Lester Burnham.)
 - b. Assume that we don't know the script story or film.
 - c. Tend to follow the plotline of the story: This happens; then this happens.
2. **Critical Evaluations**, which
 - a. Tell us whether you believe the script is good and why, like a movie review.
 - b. Often follow this logical syllogism:

Major Premise (a limited and supportable generalization): Many good films have this element.

Minor Premise (an application of a specific instance): This film has this element.

Logical Conclusion: Therefore, this film is good (or not good).
 - c. Example:

Major Premise: Many good films are both surprising and inevitable, preparing us for surprising moments with subtle but well-conceived set ups.

 - a. Example one: *Chinatown*.
 - b. Example two: *Mystic River*
 - c. Example three: *Unforgiven*

Minor Premise: *American Beauty* is both surprising and inevitable, preparing us for Colonel Fitts' kiss with subtle but well-conceived set ups that show he hates gays because he hates himself.

- d. Example one: Jim and Jim
- e. Example two: Ricky and Lester's pot deal.
- f. Example three: Colonel Fitts' beating up his son when Ricky lies and tells his father he's gay when he's not.

Logical Conclusion: Therefore, *American Beauty* is a good movie.

I've described plot summaries and critical evaluations at some length here because *I don't want you to fall into the trap of summarizing the story or telling us whether you like or dislike the script.* Instead, I'd like for you to write an original critical analysis about a well-focused and specific technique the screenwriter uses in a script.

A Few Assumptions You Can Make about Your Readers

When you write your critical analysis papers, please assume that

1. Whoever's reading your paper is already familiar with the script or film and wants to find out something new about it that we may not have considered.
2. That we don't want to be told the story again. We've read the script or seen the film a dozen times and know it as well as you do.
3. That we're less interested in whether you like or dislike the script or film than in whether you can discuss *specific writing techniques* the script writer has used to make her script effective.

I'm often surprised that students—yes, even graduate students—don't know what critical analysis is or how to approach a critical analysis paper. It's enough to say here that story telling and critical analysis are completely different writing skills but that the ability to use critical analysis can improve the study of story telling and script writing.

Critical Analyses: A Few Definitions

The *American Heritage Dictionary* defines the word *critical* as:

1. Inclined to judge severely and find fault.
2. Characterized by careful, exact judgment: *a critical reading.*
3. Of, relating to, or characteristic of critics or criticism.

These different connotations of the word *critical* may contribute to students' misunderstandings about how to approach critical analysis in a paper such as this. For this paper, I suggest that you **ignore definitions one and three and focus on definition two:**

“Characterized by careful, exact judgment: *a critical reading.*”

In other words, you don't have to be critical in the sense that you have to find fault with the script or have to play movie critic. To put it another way: You're not workshopping the script; you're analyzing how it was written.

According to the 4th Edition of the *American Heritage Dictionary*, *analysis* is the

1. The separation of an intellectual or material whole into its constituent parts for individual study.
2. The study of such constituent parts and their interrelationships in making up a whole.

How do these definitions apply to your critical analysis papers?

Writing the Critical Analysis Paper

Here's a straightforward way to approach your critical analysis papers:

1. Write a clear, concise, well-focused and original **thesis statement** about *one specific screenwriting technique a screenwriter* has used in a script of your own choosing—preferably a script you admire:

Alan Ball, the Academy Award winning scriptwriter for *American Beauty* (directed by Sam Mendez, 1999), uses subtle but well-conceived set ups to pay off the kiss Colonel Frank Fitts, a violent homophobe, gives to Lester Burnham at the of Act III, making that climactic moment and Lester's murder both surprising and inevitable.

The specific techniques—the “constituent parts”—described here are *set ups* and *pay offs*, and the purpose of the paper is to *show evidence* of how the screenwriter uses these techniques. The best way to show such evidence is to

2. Cite and enumerate specific **examples** from the script to show how the screenwriter has used these techniques and to explain your interpretation of each example's significance:

The first set up occurs on page 21, early in Act I, when Fitts' gay neighbors, Jim and Jim, appear at his front door with the housewarming gifts of flowers and pasta from Falacci's. Colonel Fitts, friendly as he's capable of being simply, doesn't yet realize that Jim and Jim are a gay couple, but as he shuts the door in their faces he rolls his eyes, suggesting that he thinks something's not quite right: Jim and Jim are just a little too friendly, friendlier than *real* men ought to be.

The sixth set up occurs on page 62 when Fitts see Lester jogging with Jim and Jim and begins to believe that Lester must be gay, too, part of a larger misunderstanding that works to set up the larger misunderstanding that his son Ricky and Lester are lovers.

And so on. For each example, it's not simply enough to slap quotations into your paper. Remember that we're more interested in your *interpretation of scenes and their importance to your thesis statement* than the quotes themselves so explain how each example is important. (Also be sure to use quotation marks for direct dialogue and carefully explain where we are in the script, which act, which page number, what the characters' names are, and so on.)

3. Finally, in your conclusion, concisely explain the deeper implications of the techniques you've described as they relate to your thesis statement and what they may suggest:

It's not enough simply to surprise a script reader or film viewer—killing off a main character at the end in an unexpected car accident, for example—but that surprise also must feel inevitable. If a set up is too obvious the pay offs in the film become predictable, but if they're subtle, like the steady progression of set ups showing Colonel Fitt's irrational and violent homophobia, we're surprised at first but then look back through the script (or watch the film again) and realize: *That kiss is the only thing that could have happened.* As Hamlet says of King Claudius, Colonel Fitts "doth protest too much" about "those fucking fags"; his pathological and violent hatred of homosexuals reflects a deeper self-hatred, and just as Colonel Fitts kisses Lester Burnham, we realize he colonel is gay. Such violent homophobia, we come to discover, may be far more common than we might think and the reasons for it far more unsettling, even in ourselves.

Final Suggestions

In your critical analysis, it's probably best to focus on *one* specific and original point you wish to make about a screenplay you've read, supplying at least three well-explained examples from the screenplay itself to support your thesis.

In addition, it's a good idea to discuss the screenplay's structure, considering a few of the following questions early on:

1. How many acts compose the screenplay?
2. What are the screenplay's major turning points?
3. Does the screenplay follow any of the genres or structures identified in the text?
4. What's the screenplay's most significant turning point? Has the screenwriter foreshadowed or set up the pay off of this moment? Is this moment both surprising and inevitable?
5. If the screenplay is an earlier draft, how does it differ from the produced film? Was anything lost or gained in the rewrite?

What's most important is for you to make some kind of original statement about a technique used in the screenplay, and what you learned by a close reading and analysis of the script, supplying concrete examples from the screenplay whenever possible to support your observations. The more examples you give, the more you explain those examples' significance, the better.

Grading Rubric for Critical Analyses of Screenplays

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|---|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| A | <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Shows surprising and original insight into a script and a scriptwriter's technique.2. Goes beneath the surface of a script's theme, characterization, structure and so on, pointing out something significant that may not be immediately obvious, |
|---|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|

showing that you're not just familiar with the script but have given it a close reading.

3. Makes clear, insightful statements of thesis.
4. Has a clear organizational scheme suggested by the original thesis statement.
5. Cites specific examples from the script and explains how they're relevant to the paper's original thesis statement.
6. Supplies clear transitions from paragraph to paragraph, sentence to sentence.
7. Is readable, concisely written, direct and clear, free of gobbledygook and bullshit, grammatical and punctuation errors and other problems.
8. Organizes logically, by topic, not chronologically.

B Includes at least three of the elements listed above.

C or
lower

1. Doesn't have an original, surprising or clear statement of thesis.
2. Doesn't cite examples or explain them in a coherent way.
3. Dwells on the obvious, making broad generalizations that anyone could agree with.
4. Skims the surface of a story without really considering screenwriting technique at all.
5. Gives just a personal response about a script's themes or characters, written at the last minute or in a general or impressionistic way.
6. Summarizes the plot.
7. Evaluates the script:
 - I like or don't like this script because . . .
 - This is a great or a lousy script because . . .

If you have additional questions about the Critical Analysis of a Produced Script, feel free to ask them in the FAQs online, and I'll be glad to answer them.

If you wish to share your papers with your group members, please do. You may get some helpful insights before you turn your papers in for a grade.