

Paper Pointers

Overall Aim:

A) First and foremost, remember that a critical essay is a formally-presented argument. You should have a clear central thesis or argumentative point, and you should back it up with specific observations about the text you are treating. You will typically want to present your thesis right away; you will then substantiate it with detailed insights into the text.

B) The **thesis** should be interesting (not obvious, although it also shouldn't be from Mars), clearly stated, and well-supported.

C) The **supporting details** should be interesting and clearly laid out. In general, the more detailed insights a paper has, the better (a paper is more likely to stand out because of the thoughtfulness or number of its specific observations than because of its main thesis).

D) **Avoid** opening or closing the paper with **generalizations** or broad comments. Remember, the goal is to increase and display your capacity for close engagement with a text or problem. Stick to the text and the task at hand; don't wax philosophic.

E) This is strictly a matter of convention, but one generally **avoids referring to oneself** in this kind of paper. Go ahead and treat your experience of the text as if it were everyone's: "The structure of 'Easter Wings' suggests. . . ."

F) This, too, is strictly conventional: one always speaks of literary texts in the **present tense**: "the reader is, therefore, surprised that Frankenstein decides to build a second creature. . . ."

Punctuation:

G) **Commas** are required between items in a series, between coordinate adjectives, before coordinating conjunctions joining independent clauses, around parenthetical elements, and after a fairly long phrase preceding the main clause of a sentence:

It demanded blood, sweat, and tears.

We heard an absorbing, frightening account.

Congress passed the bill by a wide margin, and the president signed it.

The book, the first in a series, completely changed my life.

After carefully studying all the available documents and writings, scholars could come to no definitive conclusion.

H) A **colon** indicates that what follows will be an example, explanation, or elaboration of what has just been said:

He taught them several subjects: math, physics, and chemistry.

He had a problem: he didn't know whether to go left or right.

I) **Semicolons** are used between closely related independent clauses (they're independent if they could stand alone as a sentence), and between items in a series when some of the items require internal commas:

It's a beautiful piece; I hope you like it.
He went to San Diego, California; Paris, Texas; and Houston, Texas.

J) To indicate a **dash** in typing, use two hyphens with no space before, between, or after them. They may be used around parenthetical elements or before a summarizing appositive:

The rapid spread of the disease--the number of cases doubled each month--panicked us.
Spondees, trochees, and anapests--these new terms were baffling.

K) **Ellipses**, used to indicate incompleteness or the removal of text, is formed with **three dots with spaces** between them. When what follows is a new sentence, a period is added directly after the last word (granted, the placement does seem counter-intuitive):

"Let them continue," he said . . . and left the house."
"Let them continue," he said. . . ." Later, he left the house.

L) **Italics** in print are indicated in typing by **underlining**. Underline **titles** of books and literary works substantial enough to appear as books (short **poems** are put in **quotation marks**):

I loved Hamlet and Frankenstein, but I disliked Rape of the Lock and "Simon Lee."

Quotation:

M) When providing quotations from the text, one generally has two options: one can either make one's **own words gracefully lead in** to the quoted material, or one can **make a point about the quoted material, follow that with a colon**, and then provide the quotation as proof.

These chapters argue that poets who write for publication are "vulgar, foolish pandars" (47-8).

These chapters argue against publication: "those who publish are vulgar, foolish pandars" (47-8).

N) Note that in American practice, **commas and periods go inside quotation marks** while colons and semicolons do not (you'll sometimes see this done differently in books from British presses):

Pope's use of the word "nature," although quite different from Wordsworth's, does have some similar connotations.
Pope expresses this idea with the word "nature"; Wordsworth calls it "culture."

O) When quoting **poetry**, one uses **slashes** (with a space on either side) to indicate line breaks in the original:

"Those that for claps doe write, / Let pui'nees, porters', players', praise delight,
/ And, till they. . . ."

P) When a quotation is longer than about three lines, set it off as a **block quotation**. **Indent it and single-space it, and do not use quotation marks** around it:

I didn't know where to go, so I simply ran. I hoped she wouldn't
discover that the vase was missing. . . .

Q) One reproduces poetry in its **original lineation** when writing a block quotation:

. . . Those that for claps doe write,
Let pui'nees, porter', players', praise delight,
And, till they . . .

Citation:

R) For our purposes, you can simply cite the **page numbers of novels** and essays; the **act, scene, and line numbers from plays**; and the **line numbers from poems** (when quoting more than one line, use a double l to mean "lines"):

"In short he is very human" (189).
"Stand and unfold yourself" (l.i.2).
"AWAKE, my ST. JOHN! leave all meaner things" (l. 1).
"AWAKE, my ST. JOHN! leave all meaner things / To low ambition, and the pride
of kings" (ll. 1-2).

Note that the **period follows the citation**.