The Critical Essay

This type of essay, also known as an evaluative or response essay, is not necessarily meant to be "critical" in a negative sense, but simply to analyze a particular work in terms of its author's intentions, techniques, and style. Your claims about the work may range from an analysis of its structure to an evaluation of its merit.

Purpose: to analyze and possibly evaluate a particular work
Perspective: third-person (he, she, it, one, they...)
Organization: with each point leading logically into the next, in order of importance

Typical Structure:
1. Introduction:
   a. Attention-getter focusing the reader on the work to be analyzed?
   b. Necessary background information such as the work's title and author
   c. Short summary of the work?
   d. Thesis: a strong, arguable claim about the work being analyzed
2. Body (each paragraph):
   a. Topic sentence: one major point supporting the thesis
   b. Evidence for this point using logos (logic), ethos (authority), or pathos (emotion)
   c. Specific quotes from the work being analyzed?
   d. Transition to the next major point
3. Conclusion:
   a. Concise summary of the main claim and supporting evidence
   b. Overall significance of this analysis
   c. Suggestions for further reading?

Notes:
- Read your instructions carefully. You may be asked to answer a specific question or use specific criteria to evaluate the work.
- Consider your audience. For a literary analysis, you can generally assume that your readers have already read the work. If you are writing a review, however, be sure not to give away the ending!
- Identifying and describing the work's underlying theme (or central message) may be a major part of your analysis.
- You should also comment on the author's style:
  - Tone: the narrator's particular voice and attitude
  - Diction (word choice) and syntax (phrasing)
  - Use of detail, imagery, and figurative language
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Annie Dillard’s book, *The Writing Life*, depicts what it is like to be a writer while simultaneously giving advice on how to improve one’s writing. She reflects and offers a glimpse into her own writing life while illustrating her advice with her language. Dillard does an exceptional job of discussing the life of a writer and giving advice with the use of her personal anecdotes and figurative language.

Dillard uses her own life experience to divulge on what the life of a writer is, and perhaps should be. In her book, she mentions a pine shed in which she goes to write and how the inside is very plain. She discusses what her days there are like and how she pushed her desk against a wall to avoid looking out of the windows (26). She claims, “Appealing workplaces are to be avoided” (26). This will help a writer focus more on their craft. By giving the reader a view of her own outlined life, she helps a writer understand how one can go about focusing to write.

Focusing on the craft is exactly how Dillard has become such an acclaimed author for her figurative language. *The Writing Life* is full of extended metaphors that tie her personal experiences with writing. One metaphor comes from her telling about her morning routine of chopping wood. The method for success came to her in a dream, which told her to “aim at the chopping block, not at the wood” (43). At the end of this chapter, the page is what she says will teach a writer to write; so, “aim for the chopping block. If you aim for the wood, you will have nothing. Aim past the wood, aim through the wood; aim for the chopping block” (59). In this metaphor, the page becomes the foundation, the teacher, the chopping block. If a writer focuses on that, instead of the fine details and trouble of putting words on the page, the writer will write well—not chip the wood.

Dillard’s use of anecdotes and figurative language help the reader understand how to become a better writer. She does not tell the reader what to do. Dillard shows the reader how to improve writing, illustrates beautiful writing, and shares her own difficulties as a writer. She leads by excellent example.