

How to organize a critical essay

Critical essays are not as flexible in format as personal essays, but they do not have to follow a rigid structure. There is no single five-paragraph formula that translates into a successful critical essay. However, here is a useful template for a short, 7-10 page, critical essay about *The Education of Henry Adams* which should help guide your thinking. Also, make sure to absorb ideas about structure and format from the critical articles assigned in the course syllabus. They also represent models worth emulating.

1. Introduction (1 page or less)

Create an engaging introduction that surprises the reader. Don't try to restate the obvious, but leap directly into an original or striking idea. Epigraphs can be helpful, but regardless, short, striking quotations from the text are almost always useful somewhere in the opening. Make sure to punctuate your introduction with a clear, interpretive thesis statement—one that effectively frames your essay.

2. Text (2-3 pages)

Follow a good introduction with a section devoted to summarizing the elements of *The Education* which are relevant to your theme or chapter. Here you want to demonstrate a sophisticated appreciation of the text and the ability to quote from it effectively. Use citations to the edition of the text assigned in this course.

3. Context (2-3 pages)

Then provide evidence from other primary and secondary sources that compare and contrast how Adams described his experience in *The Education* with how he appeared to have actually lived it. Here you want to demonstrate your ability to identify and incorporate high quality sources in ways that enrich the text.

4. Subtext (2-3 pages)

Once you've established a deeper context, then you can offer some interpretive insights about why Adams chose to frame his experience in the way he did in *The Education*. What was his purpose? This is a subjective question, one that requires informed speculation or interpretation. Here you should also try to quote from other scholars who have addressed the issues you are studying.

5. Conclusion (1 page or less)

Try to finish your essay by offering an original and engaging expression which illustrates your opening thesis statement and builds on the details you have just provided to the reader.

Throughout the process, keep in mind that you are writing for a general reader.