Critical Essays: Purpose, Format, Strategies

Purpose: The purpose of a critical essay, for a literature course, is to explore an idea about a text or texts and make a conclusive argument about it. The paper coheres around a thesis, which is its main idea. It uses textual evidence (quotations, references, examples) to “root” its individual points and to further its argument.

Theory: We read, we discuss, we form conclusions about important questions raised by a text. Those conclusions are based on pieces of the text that we remember or are reminded of. In writing a critical paper, you take your reader (and yourself) through that process: the thesis is the conclusion you’ve come to; textual evidence is used to show us how you reached that conclusion, how your general assertions about the text are rooted IN the text, not in air.

Form and Organization:

Introduction
Identify texts/authors, introduce the topic of the idea, and move into the thesis: this is the most common strategy. Another is to frame the question being explored in the paper and save the thesis for the conclusion. In any case, you are ushering your reader into the world of your paper. Take your time. Lay your groundwork. Open up the issue a little.

Subtopics
Paragraphs in a logical order, so a reader can follow from one point to the next. Paragraphs often begin with topic sentence that includes a transition from the preceding paragraph: “Another way in which writing autobiography can be a powerful act is . . . .” "Unlike Monette, Jacobs strives to build a bond with her readers. . . .” After the topic is introduced, it might be further explained. Then come examples, quotations, The paragraph comes to a conclusion, sometimes with a concluding sentence that points the way toward the next subtopic. (A test: can you read through your paper, topic sentence to topic sentence, and make sense of it? Can someone else who hasn’t read the full paper? Try it.)

Conclusion
The thesis is NOT repeated unless the paper is very long (i.e., an SIP). “In conclusion” is usually unnecessary and clumsy. Try saying what you think is really important about your paper’s message. Try taking your paper one step further, in some new but relevant direction.

Citation format: For literature papers, MLA Style is used: author and page number are in parentheses after quotations: (Dickens, 142). If no secondary works are used, a Works Cited list is not necessary.