

Rose Bruford Opera Studies

Guide to Writing Assignments

- **Essay format,**
- **What is critical/academic writing?**
- **Creating an argument,**
- **Using secondary source critically.**

Essay format:

Introduction – state what you are going to do and how you are going to do it.

Paragraphs – each paragraph should present a new facet of your argument replete with supporting evidence from your primary sources and furthered by a critical handling of secondary sources.

Conclusion - this will summarise your argument.

Your essay should present an **argument** (your thought about the topic) not merely describe the work or a composer. Merely stating what is there (repeating the plot or biographical details) will not get you high marks. Use your primary sources (score, libretto, letters) and secondary sources (books by others on the work/ composer/ genre) to further your argument.

What is critical/academic writing?

Sometimes writers put down a lot of interesting facts or anecdotes without any comment or analysis – this is descriptive writing. It does not progress things – it does not present a developed point of view (argument) or an analysis of the facts. Most non-academic books do this – they are easy reading; whereas academic books present an argument or a debate that takes the facts a step further offering new insights and new ways of looking at the subject.

Descriptive writing – do **NOT** do this.

With descriptive writing you are not developing an argument; you are merely setting the background within which an argument can be developed. You are representing the situation as it stands, without presenting any analysis or discussion.

In providing only description, you are presenting **but not transforming** the information; you are reporting ideas but not taking them forward in any way.

An assignment using only descriptive writing will only gain low marks.

Critical writing/ academic writing – you should always aim for this

Here you

- 1) **weigh up the evidence and arguments of others**
- 2) **contribute your own thoughts and insights in the light of this evidence**

Do not just state your opinions and take them no further - you need to support them with evidence (to prove the validity of what you are saying) and point to others who have similar or opposing ideas. Opinions on their own are just that – opinions, with no academic weight behind them and gain you no marks.

In critical writing you take all the following steps some of which begin during your research as you read around the topic before you start writing:

You consider the evidence and arguments you have read

You identify the key aspects you can comment on – both positive and negative

You assess their relevance to the assignment topic - they may be interesting, but if they are not relevant, don't use them!

You identify how best they can be used in your argument.

Of course you have to set the background for your argument but do not stop there, go on to create an argument that analyses and develops the ideas and evidence.

A much higher level of skill is needed for critical writing and this is reflected in the higher marks given.

Creating an argument:

Do not fall into the trap of thinking that the more quotes you include, the stronger your argument.

You must always remember to

Interpret quotes to explain the relevance to your argument

Discuss their validity

Show how they relate to other evidence

Here are the four cardinal rules for critical writing:

1. Do not accept what other writers say without evaluating their arguments and evidence.
2. Give reasons why other writers' conclusions may be accepted/ need further evaluation/ may need to be treated with caution/ are wrong in the face of the evidence
3. Be open about the limitations of your own argument
4. Always present your own evidence and argument clearly, leading to a summary of your argument in your conclusion – do not just list the facts and expect the reader to create the argument – you must state everything.

Using secondary sources critically:

Secondary sources are like the ingredients of your bread – you assemble them (your research notes from your reading) but then you must work them in order to create the dough (your argument). You work them by kneading them and folding them in every possible way (interrogating them).

Use secondary sources to further your argument.

Do not be afraid to challenge the ideas you find in secondary sources.

Make secondary source an integral part of your argument rather than just put them there to adorn what you have said.

Always evaluate your sources: interrogate, interrogate, interrogate!

Never just put a list of quotations expecting the reader to evaluate them and see how they contribute to your argument.



Your essay should be like a meal in a restaurant – when it arrives at your table it is complete – you do not have to ask the chef for additional things, everything you require is on your plate.

The moment the reader has to start working out why you have used a quote or what the relevance is of any statement you have made, or draw the conclusion themselves, you start losing marks.

Some examples of how you can use sources critically:

A says X, however B notes Y which shows that when considering which links with the present argument by

Using A's argument of it is clear that in the example of.....

Whilst A, B and C support the view that X is..... it seems that when this work is approached/or is considered in the way outlined above a very different/another approach emerges

Having said X, if A's theory is utilised another facet emerges which.....

A offers an interesting approach here which demonstrates that.....

While source A states that X is apparent it is clear from the letters/section of music that.....

The received thinking on is supported by A and B however C takes this further by saying that