

THE CRITICAL REVIEW ESSAY

The purpose of the critical review essay is to develop a solid understanding of and position on a particular issue or topic of XXXXXXX [broad program theme] as well as to provide a comparative analysis and evaluation of the work of several authors currently writing on this issue. It enables you to investigate and evaluate a concentration of readings that offer various perspectives on a topic of particular interest to you and then to share your understanding of that topic with the entire group.

Keep in mind that this is a *critical review essay*, not a book report. This means that you should build the essay in the usual manner, with a beginning (introduction), a middle (the primary argument and evidence), and an end (the conclusion).

The *beginning* should set the necessary context and overall argument. It should tell readers what the essay is about and why it is interesting and important enough for them to care about it, either in terms of the ongoing historical debates, the historical record, or understanding contemporary issues. The introduction should also include your thesis statement that provides the thread and argument you will carry through the entire essay. This should be your organizing principle.

The *middle* contains the bulk of the essay, consisting of a series of short reviews of the three or four books under consideration. While each book needs to be introduced and addressed – in terms of its purpose, approach, argument, place in the ongoing debates, use of evidence, major contribution (does the author break new ground?), etc. – this section should be more than the sum of its parts. It is not simply a recapitulation of the contents of the three books. The books must also be compared, common themes and approaches noted, as well as disagreements among the texts. Your voice should be heard here as well, developing your own position on this topic as well as the authors' treatment of it.

The *end* contains the conclusion, reminding your readers of the importance of the topic and providing a final assessment of the books and their contribution to furthering the understanding of the larger questions or contexts set out in the introduction.

Your review should be 12-15 pages, properly footnoted with a complete bibliography. Please follow *The Chicago Manual of Style*. Be sure that supporting evidence or necessary contextual information is also properly cited. In order to properly contextualize and assess the books under review, you should draw on the program readings and will undoubtedly need to do some library research. We will discuss this in more detail as the review books are chosen. As you write, consider the members of this program as your audience; a group of well-informed individuals who share with you a growing scholarship in XXXXX [the early American period]. The level of your argument and analysis should be appropriate to this audience. In addition, early in the

quarter we will read several published review essays on this historical period and discuss their strengths and weaknesses

Students working on the same general topics are expected to meet regularly outside of class time to discuss their work. Once the books are selected, I will establish these working groups. Students within each group will exchange, read, and critique the first draft. **Book selection titles, with full bibliographic citations, are due XXXX. Your Review Essay is due XXXXX.**

In week ten we will share our critical reviews through oral presentations. We will use a panel format which will encourage substantial program-wide discussion. Prior to your presentation prepare a one-paragraph abstract of your critical review, including the full bibliographic citations of the books under review. Be sure to make enough copies to distribute to everyone.

SUGGESTED BOOKS FOR THE CRITICAL REVIEW ESSAY

The following bibliography is not exhaustive; it is merely suggestive. I urge you to search further in the areas of your interest. This bibliography primarily consists of relatively new texts (published within the past six or seven years) plus some of the “classics” in the field, authors to whom newer historiographical fashion must respond. No biographies, edited volumes or anthologies are included in this bibliography and are not acceptable for review essays. There is considerable overlap among categories, and some titles might easily be placed in several categories. I suggest that you choose three or four books from one category. If you want select from more than one category be sure you see the connections among the books you choose (in other words, be sure there are commonalities to compare and build an argument around); and please check with me. If you choose books outside the list, bring the books in to me as soon as you have located them, no later than XXXXX.

[Here I provided a substantial bibliography of new academically sound books divided into several categories from which the students could choose. This helped focus the entire body of work under review, making for richer discussion in the “panels” and it made it less likely students would select inappropriate (on several possible counts) books.]

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Presenting the Review Essays

A SERIES OF PANEL DISCUSSIONS OF NEW SCHOLARSHIP ON XXXXXXXX

The Evergreen State College 3-4 June XXX

This formative and highly controversial historical period continues to stimulate new work generate historiographical debate, and encourage reassessment. This conference is designed to establish a forum for consideration of some of the scholarship produced over the past ten years, along with several paradigm-setting classics. The purpose of the three panels is to stimulate discussion and analysis among a group of young scholars who are in the process of developing a sophisticated understanding of this very important period.

On the conference's opening day each individual participant will circulate a one-page abstract of his or her written review essay, including full citations of the books under review. The oral conference presentations are to be designed to stimulate discussion and reflection on the issues raised by the reviewed books. They may, therefore, depart considerably from the written Critical Review Essay upon which they are based.

The format for the two days is as follows. Within the three panels, each group will have 45 minutes to make its presentation. Every member of the group is to participate in the oral presentation, covering the three books he or she reviewed. Beyond this requirement, each group may organize its presentation format as it best sees fit. The group should leave 5 minutes at the end of its presentation for brief clarifying questions from other members of the panel and the audience. Following the group presentations within each panel, there will be a 30 minute general discussion. This discussion should begin among members of the panel raising unresolved issues and then move to a general discussion of the whole.