

Writing a “Lens” Essay

This handout provides suggestions for writing papers or responses that ask you to analyze a text through the lens of a critical or theoretical secondary source.

Generally, the lens should reveal something about the original or “target” text that may not be otherwise apparent. Alternatively, your analysis may call the validity of the arguments of the lens piece into question, extend the arguments of the lens text, or provoke some other reevaluation of the two texts. Either way, you will be generating a critical “dialogue between texts.”¹

1) Reading the texts

Since you will eventually want to hone in on points of commonality and discord between the two texts, the order and manner in which you read them is crucial.

First, read the lens text to identify the author’s core arguments and vocabulary. Since theoretical or critical texts tend to be dense and complex, it may be helpful to develop an outline of the author’s primary points. According to the Brandeis Writing Program Handbook, a valuable lens essay will “grapple with central ideas” of the lens text, rather than dealing with isolated quotes that may or may not be indicative of the author’s argument as a whole.² As such, it’s important to make sure you truly understand and can articulate the author’s main points before proceeding to the target text.

Next, quickly read the target text to develop a general idea of its content. Then, ask yourself: Where do I see general points of agreement or disagreement between the two texts? Which of the lens text’s main arguments could be applied to the target text? It may be easier to focus on one or two of the lens text’s central arguments.

With these ideas in mind, go back and read the target text carefully, through the theoretical lens, asking yourself the following questions: What are the main components of the lens text and what are their complementary parts in the target text? How can I apply the lens author’s theoretical vocabulary or logic to instances in the target text? Are there instances where the lens text’s arguments don’t or can’t apply? Why is this? It is helpful to keep a careful, written record of page numbers, quotes, and your thoughts and reactions as you read.

2) Outlining

Since this type of paper deals with a complex synthesis of multiple sources, it is especially important to have a clear plan of action before you begin writing. It may help to group quotes or events by subject matter, by theme, or by whether they support, contradict, or otherwise modify the arguments in the lens text. Hopefully, common themes, ideas, and arguments will begin to emerge and you can start drafting!

3) Writing the Introduction and Thesis

As your paper concerns the complex interactions between multiple texts, it is important to explain what you will be doing in the introduction. Make sure to clearly introduce the lens text and its specific arguments you will be employing or evaluating. Then introduce the target text and its specific themes or events you will be addressing in your analysis.

¹ Brandeis UWS Writing Handbook, 70.

<http://www.brandeis.edu/writingprogram/davisgrant/UWSHandbook/lens%20essay%20assignment.pdf>

² UWS Handbook, 76.

These introductions of texts and themes should lead into some kind of thesis statement. Though there are no set guidelines or conventions for what this thesis should look like, make sure it states the points of interaction you will be discussing, and explains what your critical or theoretical analysis of the target text reveals about the texts.

5) Writing the Body

The body is where you apply specific arguments from the lens text to specific quotes or instances in the target text. In each case, make sure to discuss what the lens text reveals about the target text (or vice versa). Use the lens text's vocabulary and logical framework to examine the target text, but make sure to be clear about where ideas in the paper are coming from (the lens text, the target text, your own interpretation etc.) so the reader doesn't become confused.

Templates:

By engaging in this type of analysis, you are "entering an academic conversation" and inserting your own ideas. As this is certainly easier said than done, Gerald Graff and Cathy Birkenstein's concept of "Templates" may prove useful.³ In their book, *They Say, I Say*, the authors lay out numerous templates to help writers engage in unfamiliar forms of critical academic discourse. They encourage students to use the templates in any capacity they find useful, be it filling them in verbatim, modifying and extending them, or using them as an analytical entry point, then discarding them completely.

Here I modify their basic template (They say _____. I say _____), to create lens essay-specific templates to help you get started:

The author of the lens text lays out a helpful framework for understanding instances of _____ in the target text. Indeed, in the target text, one sees _____, which could be considered an example of _____ by the lens author's definition. Therefore, we see a point of commonality concerning _____. This similarity reveals _____.

According to the lens text _____ tends to occur in situations where _____. By the lens author's definition, _____ in the target text could be considered an instance of _____. However, this parallel is imperfect because _____. As such, we become aware of _____.

One sees _____ in the target text, which calls the lens author's argument that _____ into question because _____.

If the author of the lens text is correct that _____, one would expect to see _____ in the target text. However, _____ actually takes place, revealing a critical point of disagreement. This discord suggests that _____. This issue is important because _____.

6) Wrapping things up and drawing conclusions

By this point in your essay, you should be drawing conclusions regarding what your lens analysis reveals about the texts in questions, or the broader issues the texts address. Make sure to explain why these discoveries are important for the discipline in which you are writing. In other words, what was the point of carrying out your analysis in the first place? Happy lens writing!

³ Birkenstein, Cathy and Gerald Graff, *They Say, I Say*. (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2007), 2-3.