

## How to write a critical analysis of an extract from a play or novel

In your assignments and exam, you will be given extracts to analyse. You will be expected to write an essay in which you closely analyse the elements of each extract. **Note that you must not write a thematic essay.** This means that you will not be answering a question such as: 'What causes Macbeth's downfall?' A 'critical analysis' – also known as a 'close reading' – is a skill-based exercise in which you need to demonstrate your ability to focus intensively on a small portion of a play/novel (or to provide a detailed analysis of a poem).

### Preparing to write a critical analysis:

1. Read through the extract at least twice.
2. Make sure you know from which section of the play/novel the extract is taken – you need to know what happens immediately before and immediately after the extract (this applies only if the extract comes from a prescribed text, such as *Porcelain and Pink* – many of your extracts are unseen, in which case you will not be required to contextualise the extract). You also need to make sure that you understand exactly what happens *in* the extract.
3. Identify the key features of the extract. You will be looking for things such as (but not limited to):
  - The tone of the extract
  - The type of language used (For example, are there many adjectives?)
  - Characterisation (How are the characters portrayed?)
  - Predominant themes
  - Imagery
  - Figures of speech
  - Use of metre, rhythm and rhyme (mostly for poetry).
  - Punctuation (Are there, for example, many question marks?)
  - Irony or dramatic irony

All of the above might not apply to the extract you get. It is *your job* to look at the extract and decide which of these elements apply best to it. Go through the extract and physically circle or underline any evidence you see of the above. This will form the body of your essay, and will help prevent you from committing the **deadliest of critical analysis sins: retelling the story.**

### The structure of a critical analysis:

As with any essay, your critical analysis needs an introduction, a body and a conclusion.

In the **introduction**, you will contextualise the extract for the reader and give a brief discussion of what you will discuss in the rest of your essay. The **body** will consist of a discussion of the key features you identify in the extract. Your argument will be summed up in the **conclusion**.

### Writing a critical analysis

1. Start with your introduction. In **one or two paragraphs**, you need to contextualise the extract. This means that you need to say what happens **immediately** prior to the extract, what happens in the extract, as well as what happens **immediately** after the extract. If you do not know the play or novel, merely state briefly what happens in the extract. You must also mention briefly what you will be discussing in the rest of your essay.

DO NOT TRY TO CRAM THE ENTIRE PLOT INTO YOUR INTRODUCTION. At no point in this exercise should you attempt to 'tell the story' of the play/novel from beginning to end. Your focus should only be on the extract you are given.

Here is an example of an introductory paragraph for a close reading of an extract from Shakespeare's play, *Macbeth* (the extract is provided at the end of this document):

This is an extract from the play, *Macbeth*, by William Shakespeare. Immediately before this extract, Lady Macbeth receives a letter from Macbeth in which he tells her of the witches' prophecies and of Duncan's impending arrival. In the extract, we see Lady Macbeth calling upon the spirits of darkness to help her find the strength she will need to orchestrate Duncan's murder. After the conclusion of this extract, she advises Macbeth on how he should act towards Duncan. Duncan then arrives at the castle, and the Macbeths set their plan to murder Duncan into action. In this essay, I will provide a close reading of the extract which will focus on diction, poetic devices, imagery and characterisation.

2. The body of your essay needs to be more than a mere description of what happens in the extract. You need to use the key features you identified to guide your discussion of how the author conveys her/his meaning.
3. Start at the beginning of the extract and discuss diction, poetic devices, imagery and characterisation. To do this, you need to follow a certain progression in your argument. You need to answer **what**, **how** and **why** for every point you make. Here is an example:
  - **WHAT:** In line 36, Lady Macbeth refers to a "raven" that "croaks" itself "hoarse".
  - **HOW:** This image of a raven is symbolic, as ravens are traditionally associated with evil.
  - **WHY:** The effect of this is to create an ominous tone and to foreshadow Duncan's murder.(**Note:** you do not actually write out 'what', 'how' and 'why' each time that you make a point. You just have to bear these questions in mind as you discuss elements in the extract.)
4. You should also link your ideas to each other logically as you work through the extract in your discussion. Here is an example of a paragraph which analyses an extract from *Macbeth*:

In line 36, Lady Macbeth refers to a "raven" that "croaks" itself "hoarse". This image of a raven is symbolic, as ravens are traditionally associated with evil. The effect of this is to create an ominous tone and to foreshadow Duncan's murder. This is again seen in Lady Macbeth describing Duncan's "entrance" as "fatal". "Fatal" refers to something that unavoidably leads to death or tragedy. Thus, her use of the word strengthens the ominous tone.

5. How do you know when to begin a new paragraph? The two points discussed above clearly form one sense unit in that they discuss the same thing. You have to start a new paragraph each time that you start to discuss a new idea.
6. Equally importantly, you need to QUOTE from the extract in your discussion. **Note that my quotes logically form part of the flow of the sentence.**

In line 36, Lady Macbeth refers to a "raven" that "croaks" itself "hoarse". ✓  
"The raven himself is hoarse / That croaks" Lady Macbeth uses symbolism. X

Any marker who sees fragmented quotes dangling from the ends of sentences will immediately deduct marks.

Sometimes, you might only want to use a portion of a quote and leave out the middle bit. To indicate that you have omitted a part, you use [...].

A quote with an omission would read:

“Come, you spirits [...] unsex me here”. (Notice that the quote still makes grammatical sense.)

You would then have to incorporate this quote into a properly-structured sentence:

We see an example of the theme of masculinity, when Lady Macbeth says, “Come, you spirits [...] unsex me here”. (Remember that this still needs a **HOW** and **WHY**).

7. Practice incorporating a few quotes into logical, grammatical sentences.
8. Remember that every reader will find different things to comment on within an extract, so there is no ‘right’ answer. However, what is important is that your essay is structured logically, that you argue your points clearly, and that you always provide evidence from the text in order to support your arguments. You need to provide a scholarly, well-argued view, not a summary of your personal, unsubstantiated opinions or feelings.
9. Any literary discussion is ALWAYS written in the present tense, even when the events you are discussing happened in the past.

In line 36, Lady Macbeth **refers** to a “raven” that “croaks” itself “hoarse”. ✓

In line 36, Lady Macbeth **referred** to a “raven” that “croaks” itself “hoarse”. ✗

10. The register of your essay should be formal. This means that you should never use any abbreviations or any slang whatsoever; you should also avoid using contractions.  
Note: contractions are words in which you use an apostrophe in order to leave out letters, e.g. “didn’t” or “isn’t” instead of “did not” and “is not”. Do not confuse this with possessives: words in which you use an apostrophe in order to indicate possession, e.g. “*Macbeth’s* ambition” or “the *witches’* plan”. Make sure that every sentence is **grammatically complete** and correct. Always explain yourself as fully as you possibly can, and stay focused on the extract.
11. Your conclusion to an essay in which you perform a close analysis of a passage should sum up your general impression of the passage. Do not introduce new ideas to your conclusion that have not been explained and illustrated in more detail in the body of your essay. You should also remember that your conclusion must still provide a scholarly opinion. Do not use this space to explore personal feelings or unsubstantiated opinions.

Here is an example of a conclusion to a close reading of the passage from *Macbeth* provided below:

This essay has shown that Lady Macbeth reacts to the news of Macbeth’s prophecy that he will become king in a different way from Macbeth. While Macbeth responds with uncertainty when he first considers killing Duncan and focuses on the ethical and psychological implications of the deed, Lady Macbeth attempts to close off her mind to any doubts and steels herself for what she believes must be done.

12. Always edit your essay before handing it in – spelling errors can cause you to lose marks and create a terrible impression on the marker.

**Extract from *Macbeth* Act I, Scene 5: ll. 13-28**

The raven himself is hoarse  
That croaks the fatal entrance of Duncan  
Under my battlements. Come, you spirits  
That tend on mortal thoughts, unsex me here;  
And fill me, from the crown to the toe, top-full  
Of direst cruelty! make thick my blood,  
Stop up the access and passage to remorse,  
That no compunctious visitings of nature  
Shake my fell purpose, nor keep peace between  
The effect and it! Come to my woman's breasts,  
And take my milk for gall, you murdering ministers,  
Wherever in your sightless substances  
You wait on nature's mischief! Come, thick night,  
And pall thee in the dunnest smoke of hell  
That my keen knife see not the wound it makes  
Nor heaven peep through the blanket of the dark  
To cry, "Hold, hold!"