CRITICAL WRITING

Although the word "criticism" is often used to mean the act of finding fault, in English courses it is usually used to mean analyzing the strengths and the weaknesses of a particular work in order to make a careful judgment about the work. College students, who have been trained in high school to write only book reports or summaries, must learn to develop their critical judgments in order to compare, contrast, and evaluate assigned reading.

The first step in critical writing is critical reading which includes attention to details of the author's language. One reading is never enough. Three or four should be considered the minimum necessary before beginning the critical writing.

In writing criticism, you will use various methods of exposition and argument. Whatever methods you use, however, be sure to do the following:

1. **CLASSIFY THE WORK WHICH YOU ARE CRITICIZING.**
   You must tell readers whether a written work, for example, is a novel or a biography or a report on economic conditions. "A dictionary," as Mark Twain remarked humorously, "can scarcely be blamed for having little plot."

2. **INDICATE THE SCOPE AND NATURE OF YOUR CRITICAL APPROACH.**
   If you plan to limit your discussion to a minor character in Hamlet, for example, tell your readers that, and explain why it is necessary or valuable to focus on that character.

3. **SUMMARIZE THE CONTENT OF THE WORK.** An adequate summary gives the proper foundation to your criticism. But be brief, and include only the essential features of the work. Remember that your purpose is to criticize it, not to save your readers the trouble of reading it for themselves. In summarizing, it is customary to use the present tense to summarize the main actions of the narrative because then you can use the past and future tenses to refer to events occurring before and after that part of the narrative under immediate consideration. If a work is very well known, for example, Hamlet, a summary may not be necessary, but you should still let the readers know which section you are discussing, so that they can recognize it quickly and easily.

4. **INTERPRET AND EVALUATE THE WORK.**
   Have the courage of your convictions. Do not feel intimidated by the fame of the writer whose work you are criticizing, or of the critics with whom you may disagree. Use objective analysis and logic as the basis of your criticism, and rely on emotional words and phrases only to add vitality and color. Be sure to explain how your interpretation resembles or differs from the evaluations of major critics. Support your remarks with specific illustrations from the work and with relevant information, such as the historical background, and explain how the illustrations and information support your evaluation.