

“Discuss.”
A guide to the Cambridge “prac. crit.”

1. *contextualize* your piece by considering:

- historical context
- literary precedent
- place of piece in author’s corpus (and in the given text)

2. *analyze* your piece by considering:

- distinction between materials and treatment: ask yourself “How else could this passage have been written?”
- any particular occasion (or imagined occasion) involved? (see esp. Cairns below)
- form or literary tradition involved: adherence or departure?
- is there an addressee?
- who is the (implied) audience? (see esp. Booth below)
- techniques utilized
- *topoi* (“commonplaces”—do not confuse this word with *trope*, as so many do)
- *tropoi* (“tropes”, i.e. figures of speech [see esp. Lanham and Lausberg below])
- author’s “voice” or literary *persona*
- where is the place in the plot?
- how is any characterization rendered through the passage?
- look for narrative problems, e.g. what is the “point of view” of the narrator?
- is it a “showing” passage or a “telling” passage (see esp. Booth below)
- allusion to other texts or authors
- keywords (perhaps go through the passage and circle words you feel you must address)
- any major themes evident? if so how do these themes connect to your passage?

syntactical elements and effects e.g.

- anaphora
- zeugma
- transferred epithet

rhetorical elements

- *captatio benevolentiae*
- *praeteritio*
- *adunata*

logical elements

- *argumentum ad absurdum, a minore, a maiore, ex hypothesi*

larger scale formal elements

- the “set piece”, i.e. a traditional, expected element, e.g. the narrative in a messenger speech in drama
- know the formal divisions of a typical Greek play: prologue, parodos, episode, stasimon, exodos
- *rhexis* (extended speech in trimeters)
- *agon*
- *stichomythia*
- *ekphrasis*
- *locus amoenus*
- digression
- narrative

other techniques

- segment your text; mark out each sentence: what does it actually say and mean?
- delineate a sequence of ideas
- note very carefully any connecting particles (or lack thereof)
- write a brief, one sentence summary of the whole
- for drama: envision a production of the lines
- overall: consider how characteristic the piece is for your author or his tradition

In sum: assume that an author is somehow responsible for this text and that you are analyzing his performance: ask yourself “How else could this have been done?” Alternatively, how is the text affected if you remove these lines, i.e. what is their function?

3. *synthesize* your ideas by:

- organizing your points into an argument: try to be persuaded and persuasive
- can you give your essay a title of its own, e.g. “Cicero’s *Pro Archia* 15: Erudition has its place”.
- connecting your text to other texts you have read and other critical problems you have encountered

4. *stylize* your essay by:

- avoid “we”: use the first person and don’t be ashamed of your impressions
- avoid “let us now turn” vel sim.: this always disguises an arbitrary argument: explain your train of thought (esp. in essays)
- qualify your statements: you are not the authority here but a learned commentator, open to reason and employing reason
- imagine your own audience to be a well-informed colleague but not necessarily a Classicist: have confidence

5. recommended reading (roughly in order of accessibility and importance)

Wikipedia s.vv. “Literary criticism” and “Rhetoric”.

OCD s.vv. “literary criticism in antiquity”, “literary theory and classical studies”, and “rhetoric, Greek” and “rhetoric, Latin”.

J. Culler, *Literary Theory: A Very Short Introduction*. (worth buying—you need to understand the basic history of literary criticism)

R. Lanham, *A Handlist of Rhetorical Terms*. (worth buying: a detailed but handy reference to the terms)

Edward J. Corbett and Robert J. Connors, *Classical Rhetoric for the Modern Student*. (worth buying: a textbook overview of rhetoric)

R. Wellek and A. Warren, *Theory of Literature*. (worth buying: dated but stimulating and seminal)

Cambridge History of Literary Criticism. (multivolume: the most recent vol. on 20th C criticism is well worth reading)

D. A. Russell and M. Winterbottom, *Ancient Literary Criticism: The Principal Texts in New Translations*.

Wayne C. Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction*. (on the novel and very long but explains “showing” vs “telling” inter alia)

Wayne C. Booth, *The Rhetoric of Rhetoric*.

W. K. Wimsatt and M. Beardsley, *The Verbal Icon: Studies in the Meaning of Poetry*. (dated and dense but seminal: affective and intentional fallacies addressed)

I. A. Richards, *Practical Criticism*. (written by a Cambridge English don in 1929: very dated now but the book that started it all)

H. Lausberg, *Handbook of Literary Rhetoric*. (authoritative)

Francis Cairns, *Generic Composition in Greek and Roman Poetry*. (constrictive but significant)

Cambridge History of Classical Literature. (dated and non-theoretical but comprehensive and very useful)

N.B. in general also the work of George A. Kennedy on Classical rhetoric:

The Art of Persuasion in Greece

The Art of Rhetoric in the Roman World

Classical Rhetoric and its Christian and Secular Tradition from Ancient to Modern Times

A New History of Classical Rhetoric

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