

Topics and Activities for Critical Response

The following connects to p. 222 of *Acting on Words*, which completes the Chapter 14 introduction to critical thinking and analysis.

Note: Many of the following topics push critical analysis into the domain of explicit argumentation. For more on that form, see *Acting on Words*, Chapter 16.

1. The past 50 years or so in North American society have witnessed remarkable social changes. Identify a change that many people seem to herald as an improvement, concede the improvements insofar as you can, but then explain why the change is really best viewed as detraction. Alternatively, identify a social change that many seem to herald as detraction, concede the demerits insofar as you can, but then explain why the change is really best viewed as an improvement. Whichever approach you choose for this topic, be sure in your thesis statement to give your controlling idea and to list your reasons. In your body paragraphs, discuss the reasons you have listed, one reason per paragraph.
2. Think about common beliefs. For example, many people today assume that crime rates per capita are higher in cities than in rural areas, but studies suggest this is not so. Many people assume that parents today spend less time with their children than was the case 40 years ago. Studies show this belief to be wrong. Identify a common belief that you happen to have strong grounds to believe is mistaken. In the body of your essay, first explain why you believe the idea is mistaken, then move on to suggest problems that may arise from the false idea; finally, suggest benefits that you believe would arise if more people had the correct idea that you have presented.
3. Is human behaviour primarily the result of genes, primarily the result of environment, or perhaps some combination of the two with possibly even a third or fourth factor involved? Define your view of this complex cause-effect relationship as precisely as you can and use examples and other forms of support to convince your reader to consider your opinion on this debate.
4. Think about the history of a particular family, community, or region. Identify two or three main things that you believe played a crucial role in defining that family, institution, organization, community, or region today. In your discussion, use examples and explanations to convince your reader that the two or three issues you have identified truly were important determinants of the present situation.

5. Select an essay from *Acting on Words*, either from the Rhetoric or the Reader. Identify the controlling idea and supporting reasons presented by the article and perhaps comment on the main rhetorical features and methods. Then complete your introduction by stating a critical response to some element of the reading. This element could be the controlling idea, one of its supporting points, or a particular rhetorical technique. Your assertion of critical response at the end of your introduction should give your controlling idea and a list of reasons in support of that idea. Your body paragraphs should treat those reasons one at a time.
6. Canadians often comment that the one thing binding us together as communities and perhaps a nation is hockey. Research the history of hockey as well as the history of soccer. You will find that the earliest soccer-type games date back to ancient times. Keeping soccer in mind as a contrast, consider what it is about hockey that seems to reflect Canada. Write an essay exploring what you believe the game and hockey tells us about the Canadian psyche. Will hockey give way to the dominance of another sport and, if so, will that signal some important change in the Canadian state of mind?
7. Read “Life in the Stopwatch Lane” (pp. 451-453). Does it characterize an attitude to time that appears to predominate in North America? Identify a culture or community that seems to preserve a different relationship to time. Contrast these attitudes to time and explain what important insights we can gain by this reflection.
8. In his book *The Great Turning: From Empire to Earth Community*, David C. Korten uses a problem-solution structure to identify what he sees as an essential problem, and to propose possible outcomes. The problem he identifies is “Empire”—the world ruled by attitudes and structures that emphasize hierarchy and violence to maintain control in a limited number of hands. Although he foresees various undesirable potential futures (such as a revolution followed by endless conflict among warlords), he also argues that with proper will and action, humanity still has the opportunity to implement a world order of equality, community over individualism, and environmental respect. Looking at things in the world today, do you agree with Korten that it is dominated by Empire, and do you agree that there is hope for the changes he advocates? Explain.
9. Do animals have emotions and even spiritual life? The typical attitude of science, still prevalent in much research today, maintains that animals have much more limited intelligence and emotional lives than do human beings. Their ability to communicate is generally considered to be crude and limited to issues of food, protection, and reproduction. Yet some animal scientists, such as Roger Fouts (see pages 12 – 14 *Acting on Words*), disagree. They

believe that we have significantly misunderstood animals. State whether you agree with Fouts and explain why.

10. *Alberta Views*, April 2007, looks at the war in Afghanistan and presents articles both in support of it as well as in opposition to it. One of the opposed articles asks, “What Are We Fighting For?” The author of that article, George Melnyk, article refers to Prime Minister Stephen Harper’s insistence that we are in Afghanistan to defend ourselves and to help the people. After that concession, Melnyk asks, “Does [Harper’s rhetoric] reflect reality?” Research Canada’s involvement in Afghanistan since 2001, examine what various sources report on the current situation and evaluate those sources. Then answer the question, are we really in Afghanistan primarily for self-defense and humanitarianism? Should we continue, as planned.
11. Is the world getting better, worse, or neither? Narrow the topic and explain your answer.
12. Select two essays from *Acting on Words* (from the Rhetoric or Reader) that you think would provide an interesting comparison. Compare the two with emphasis upon either an important similarity or an important difference. Be sure to demonstrate the point you wish to make and explain why it is important. Chapter 12 may provide some additional help with this particular topic.
13. In the conclusion of an essay called “The Quebec Experience: Slavery 1628-1834,” Dorothy Williams states that “Canada was not created for the equality of all its citizens” With attention to Canadian history and social realities today, respond to this claim.
14. In her essay “Canadians: What Do They Want?” (p. 467-469), Margaret Atwood refers to the possibility that then-president Ronald Reagan might blow up the world. From today’s perspective, does that suggestion, and therefore her whole article, appear exaggerated, or is her controlling idea in that essay still relevant?
15. In his 2006 book *This Is My Country, What Is Yours*, Noah Richler ruminates on what it means to be Canadian and how that connects with our literature. One of his main ideas is that for non-Aboriginal Canadians, “[t]he centre does not hold because the centre was never here” (176). He alludes to our history, since European arrival, as that of the Hudson Bay Company, the fur trade, control by a monopoly, serving as outpost of a “distant authority that took back with the one hand what it awarded with the other” (176). Rather than a unifying national myth, Canadians share, says Richler, a colonial sense of bitterness and resentment, a surly expectation of being let down by authority. He thinks that all “distinct” peoples across the land (regions, provinces,

communities, ethnic groups) believe themselves hard done by. The one thing we share, he suggests, is a sense of having been mistreated or of going to be any moment now. If he is right, then, as Brad Henderson asks in his essay “Canada Equals Canadian” (pp. 172-75), how must we look to other nations—a country of people in the upper echelon of living standards who feel hard done by. You may wish to include Brad Henderson’s critique together with Richler’s definition. Is there much or any truth to their related ideas of Canadian identity? Explain and support your answer.

16. Search the web for the famous photograph of John Lennon and Yoko Ono that appeared on the cover of *Rolling Stone* magazine on January 22, 1981. Then search for the official promotional poster of the 2007 comedy *Good Luck, Chuck*, starring Dane Cook and Jessica Alba and directed by Mark Heltrich. As you will see, the film photo imitates some essentials of the famous 1981 photo of Ono and Lennon. Write a critical comparison of the two photos. You may wish to consult Chapter 10 of *Acting on Words* for cause-effect, Chapter 11 for process description, and Chapter 12 for comparison-contrast.

Practice Activities

1. In his critique of universities, *Killing the Spirit*, Historian Paige Smith argues that along with other problems, universities are experiencing a rise of “academic fundamentalism”: the refusal of professors to acknowledge ideas that do not fit their own agenda. How might you explore whether there is any truth to this claim? Consider the methods of investigation covered in Chapter 18 and in the Text Enrichment Site document “Interviews” (Chapter 18 of the site). Discuss with classmates various steps you might take to investigate Smith’s assertion. If academic fundamentalism is, to any degree, a problem, what actions might be taken against it?
2. Compare two essays or books that present radically different critical interpretations of a subject. Here are a few examples of opposed evaluations:

In *The Third Wave*, Alvin and Heidi Toffler argue that agriculture was the first of three fundamentally different waves of history, and that we are now in the knowledge revolution, affected primarily by its unique characteristics. In contrast, Richard Manning Argues in *Against the Grain* that the major forces that

affected our history and continue to consume us—disease, imperialism, colonialism, slavery—are uniquely part of the culture of agriculture.

In their book The Fourth Wave: Business in the 21st Century, Herman Maynard, Jr. and Susan E. Mehrtens, assert that big business will be a force for good in the coming decades. In complete opposition, the late Jane Jacobs argues in Dark Age Ahead that Western society suffers from “mass amnesia”—we have forgotten the essences of our cultural values and technologies, she says. Such problems as racism, environmental catastrophe, and extreme wealth and poverty, according to her analysis and evaluation, result from the breakdown of our core institutions and values. Another book that could be used equally in opposition to the one by Maynard and Mehrtens is Morris Berman’s *Dark Ages America*.

Which of these opposed viewpoints do you agree with and why? Or do you see possible merit on both sides of the critical divide in the above cases? Your ability to analyze and evaluate will gain considerably from your close attention to the critical presentations of others.