

Essay 2 vs. the Lens Essay

The concept of the “lens” in the context of Essay 2 is problematic, in the adjectival sense (not in the nounal sense invoked by our shared prompts). While the kinds of texts that might be used in a lens essay could be used in Essay 2, thinking of Essay 2 as inviting lenses or as executable as a lens essay wouldn’t really align with Essay 2’s aims, which what’s below hopes to explain.

The first thing to keep in mind is that Essay 2 asks for at least two interpretive objects, which means the artifacts being analyzed and illuminated through each other should be equally open to interpretation or treated as equally open to interpretation. Ideally, neither object should be granted greater authority over the other(s), nor the “meaning” of one treated as more transparent than and imposable on the other(s).

The second thing to keep in mind is that, according to the prompt, the interpretive problem or difficulty should arise from the ways in which details in the interpretive objects themselves speak to each other. This will largely be tied to the relationship established between objects (the interpretive context).

These objectives could appear more straightforward when dealing with interpretive objects of a similar kind. An essay engaging with two or more art objects, or with two or more literary texts, or with two or more theoretical texts, or with two or more argumentative essays might navigate with greater ease the kind of thinking Essay 2 calls for.

The question of the “lens” only seems relevant when we mix the genres of the objects *and* one of the objects is theoretical/critical in nature. Many attributes of an effective lens essay are applicable to Essay 2: a lens text shouldn’t be “the answer,” there should be back-and-forth between the lens text and the target text; the target text could very well refine or expand or challenge the lens text; in other words, in a good lens essay, both the lens and the target text should illuminate the other.

What stand out as two important differences between a lens essay and our Essay 2, however, are (1) in lens essays, the lens text’s meaning is often treated as much more stable than the target text’s, and (2) in lens essays, the essay is intended to be written from the perspective of the lens ([as Brandeis notes](#))—we’re supposed to be looking through the lens, seeing details in the target the way the lens would.

A critical/theoretical text *could* be paired with a work of visual or literary art (or something comparable), but they would need to be placed on equal interpretive ground. In such a scenario, the art object could be seen as advancing its own theory or argument on X, just as the theoretical/critical text does, and it could be these ideas and their implications that are put into conversation. At the same time, the theoretical/critical text’s meaning should not be treated as any more fixed or privileged than the art object’s, and the essay might work to interpret that text well-beyond its explicit claims.

In general, it seems like the key is to remember that whatever types, kinds, or genres comprise Essay 2’s interpretive objects, they’re all equally seen and treated as interpretive objects (a “lens” is not the same as an interpretive object and the term suggests that which is the “lens” is not an object to be interpreted, but a tool for interpreting the target object).