

Critical Reading & Writing in the RWW: An Overview

Your critical reading and writing are vital components of your work for the program. The critical response papers are at the core of this work. These papers are not meant to be comprehensive or definitive. Instead, each one is intended to be an opportunity for close inquiry, discovery, and imaginative thought. Each paper should be focused and relatively brief, and should be guided by a thesis or argument of some kind. By the time you finish the program, the full body of your critical response papers—culminating in the Critical Paper of the thesis year—will be a tangible manifestation of your preoccupations and interests as a writer.

A good way of arriving at fruitful topics of inquiry is to do a “self-diagnostic” in regards to what your own writing might need. For example, if you are a fiction writer having trouble with dialogue, you might write a series of papers that delves into the use of dialogue in certain short stories or novels. The point is: make your critical work relevant to your creative work. By looking deeply at the work of others, you should be refining your idea of what you want to accomplish. And by thinking about issues of craft, you should be approaching your own work with more rigor. Your mentor will also be a vital source of ideas for essay topics.

Though the norm is 2-3 pages per essay, there is no set minimum or maximum for the number of pages in a critical response paper. Mentors and mentees should always be in dialogue about how the critical work can best serve the mentee. Flexibility is a hallmark of RWW mentorships.

1st Year. You should read at least 21 books or articles during the year. With your mentor’s guidance, this is the year in which you read widely in order to discover your critical interests, to challenge your own craft and aesthetic, and to learn about writers new to you. The papers should be short, usually 2-3 pages, although some topics might warrant more space. The papers should be more about the “how” than the “what.” Ideally, the papers should deal with issues of craft—that is, writerly issues. Also ideally, the essays should not be book reports, book reviews, literary criticism, or summaries of content—though, as noted above, there is flexibility for the mentor/mentee to determine the best configuration that the mentee’s critical writing might take.

2nd Year. You should read at least 15 books or articles during the year. An important part of the dialogue between you and your mentor will be determining the topic for your thesis-year Critical Paper. At the least, there should be a well-defined topic at the end of the year. In some cases, it’s advisable to have portions of the Critical Paper already drafted by the end of the second year. The critical response papers written this year can be freestanding essays, or they can be initial drafts towards the thesis-year Critical Paper. Though the second-year mentor may provide feedback on initial portions of the mentee’s Critical Paper, the mentor is not expected to read the whole essay. Completion of the essay is under the purview of the thesis-year mentor.

3rd Year. You should read at least 10-12 books or articles during the year. This may include revisiting books from earlier years, expanded reading of a certain author or topic, and other works and authors suggested by your mentor. The books selected should be instrumental to your work on your Critical Paper and your Creative Thesis. There are no critical response papers required in the thesis year. The Critical Paper, which is due in the fall of the thesis year, is considered the culmination of the student’s critical reading and writing in the program.