

Interview with a Critic

This short assignment is designed to help you begin to engage with the critical source you plan to use for your second, supported argument paper. Even if you decide later to use another critical essay for the paper, this will still be a useful exercise for approaching scholarly essays from an analytical perspective. This is also a way for you to engage in a dialogue with—rather than simply reference—the work of another scholar. The goal of supported argument essays is to use secondary sources to enhance your own ideas rather than make your argument for you.

To begin, read the critical essay of your choosing and underline and make notes to yourself as you read. Then, develop at least 5 substantive questions for your author that you think could help other readers understand the argument the author is making. You might ask about something that needs further clarification; something compelling or provocative about the essay that you'd like the author to expand on or make broader connections to; or something that is missing or skipped over in the essay. Feel free to be creative with your questions, but remember to focus on questions about the essay's arguments and how they are achieved and supported rather than questions about the critic's life or background that you'd have no way of imagining the answers to unless you consulted external sources. Try to make the questions as specific and pointed as possible, but also look for genuine questions that require complex answers. You're encouraged to refer directly to the material in your questions; your construction and phrasing of the question can already do a lot to analyze the stakes and implications of the essay.

Example:

Say I chose Brian Appleyard's "Why Don't We Love Science Fiction" from the beginning of the semester (not an option for Paper 2). I might ask questions such as the following:

- I was particularly intrigued by your point about how science fiction is a chronicler of our anxieties, but I also think there can be a great comfort in reading science fiction as a means to imagine alternative possibilities for our lives and ourselves (even if those possibilities aren't always unequivocally positive or beneficial). Might your assessment of sci-fi overemphasize its negative or cynical visions?
- Especially in the beginning of your essay, you argue that science fiction is still not considered a respectable genre in the way that "mainstream" or "canonical" fiction is, but given the genre's long history and your own attention to "classic" works of sci-fi, I wonder if there's not also a hierarchy created *within* the genre of sci-fi that replicates the canonical/non-canonical power structure of mainstream fiction. What might this say about our general inclination to create literary hierarchies? I wonder, too, if a work can be both "canonical" and "popular."
- Your essay suggests that literature—and sci-fi in particular—responds to and even actively constructs ideas about our culture (e.g. the way sci-fi anticipates developments in science). I wonder, then, if you think the genre is capable of effecting actual societal or political change as well?