



Arguments That Win – The Scholastic Critical Essay Playbook

Step-by-step craft, real award-level analysis, and workshop assignments for grades 9 to 12.

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Each part teaches the skill, shows how winning writers make their choices, and ends with workshop assignments. Coaching notes and model responses are at the back.

04.1 What a Critical Essay Is and What Judges Want

Learn what the category covers, why a position beats a report, and how published Gold Key essays chose angles that stood out. Then practice turning a topic into a claim worth defending.

Why This Matters

The Critical Essay category of the Scholastic Art & Writing Awards is for writing that informs or persuades on an idea or topic: reviews, persuasive essays, and opinion pieces all fit. Entries run 500 to 3,000 words, and sources go in the Citations and Footnotes box, which is not counted toward your word limit. Scholastic does not require a particular citation style. Its published criteria are the same for every category: originality, technical skill, and the emergence of a personal voice or vision. It does not publish a detailed rubric or tier percentages for critical essays, so anything below about what separates winners is coach's inference from reading published pieces, not a Scholastic statement.

Here is where students lose points. They write a report instead of an argument: five tidy paragraphs that explain what a book, event, or issue is without ever claiming anything a reasonable person could dispute. Or they choose a claim so large (social media is harmful, war is bad) that no 2,000 words could prove it. Grades 9 and 10 are generally expected to show a clear arguable thesis backed by specific evidence. Grades 11 and 12 are expected to add an angle nobody else in the pile is taking, plus a visible sense of why the question matters to you. Final work must be your own idea and your own writing.

Core Ideas

A critical essay makes a claim and earns it. The word critical does not mean negative. It means you are judging, interpreting, or weighing something and showing your reasoning. The category is wide, and the published Gold Key essays we studied for this series prove it: a literary comparison, a cultural history of a folktale, a case against a language habit, a health-and-regulation argument, an ethics-of-technology essay, and a reported-style piece on child labor in the cocoa trade all sit comfortably in one category.

- ◆ **Interpretive essays** read a text, film, song, or artwork closely and argue what it means or how it works.
- ◆ **Evaluative essays and reviews** judge something against criteria you state and defend.
- ◆ **Persuasive and policy essays** argue that something should change, and say what and how.
- ◆ **Cultural and historical analysis** traces how a thing, idea, or story changed and why it matters now.

The three tests of a claim

Arguable: a smart reader could disagree with it.

Specific: it names the thing, the stance, and the reason in one sentence.

Provable: you can support it with evidence you can actually gather and explain in your word count.

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Report versus argument

A report answers: what is it? An argument answers: what should we believe or do about it, and why? If your draft would still be true if you deleted every opinion, it is a report. Judges tend to reward the writer who takes a position and lets the evidence do the persuading.

Move	What it looks like	Why it earns credit
Take a position	A thesis someone could argue against	Shows independent thinking
Choose an angle	A fresh object of study or a narrow framing	Signals originality
Prove it	Specific evidence, explained	Shows technical skill
Care visibly	A personal stake or a precise voice	Shows emerging voice

Case Studies

Every full-text critical essay we could read publicly is a regional Gold Key piece (Indiana's regional anthologies publish them). We found no readable Silver Key or Honorable Mention essays, so our tier contrasts are inference. Also note that our analyses come from second-hand extractions of the essays, so treat sentence-level claims as approximate. All paraphrase below is ours.

CASE STUDY 1: "THE WORD CHOICE OF HATRED" (REGIONAL GOLD KEY, 2024, INDIANA ANTHOLOGY)

What the essay does: it argues that prejudice is hard to erase but its vocabulary can be changed, and it proposes retiring one widely used term and replacing it with new ones.

SOLUTION

Development: the thesis closes the first paragraph and is a proposal about language, not an interpretation of a text. The body builds a long runway: the history of a stereotype, a government order, everyday costs, media portrayal, then a close look at what the suffix in the term implies, then the replacement words. The problem half is long and the fix half short, so the new terms land as a payoff. Craft: long, multi-clause sentences in the history sections alternate with one-word fragments where emotion rises. The opening predator-and-prey metaphor returns later as a frame. The writer moves between I, you, and we, so the writer is witness, advocate, and member of a community at once. Effect and flaws: the personal stake is the engine of credibility. Weak spots, by our reading: some statistics lack attribution and the novelty of the proposal outruns its defense. Inference: a lower-tier version would likely stay at the general claim that stereotypes are bad. What stands out is the risky, distinct concept.

CASE STUDY 2: "PETALS OF DEATH" (REGIONAL GOLD KEY, 2024, INDIANA ANTHOLOGY)

What the essay does: it links one plant, the opium poppy, to two events centuries apart, the nineteenth-century opium wars and the modern opioid epidemic.

SOLUTION

Development: a sensory portrait of the flower and its myths opens the piece, and the thesis at the end of paragraph one says the plant's appeal to human greed ties the eras together. A short botany bridge follows, then two war narratives with a named historical official as the human center, a pivot to the modern crisis, an accountability section, and a coda that personifies the flower and loops back to the opening myth. Craft: triads, parallel structure across the episodes, and a repeated motif of greed make a two-case comparison feel like a moral argument. The register swings between lyrical and casual, which is a tonal flaw, but it gives the essay journalistic energy. Effect and flaws: the circular ending gives literary shape. The historical half is better sourced than the modern half, where several large figures have no citation. Takeaway: the cross-century analogy is the idea; sourcing is the polish you can fix.

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CASE STUDY 3: "REDEFINING LOVE AND POWER IN GLUCK'S HADES AND MITCHELL'S HADESTOWN" (REGIONAL GOLD KEY, 2026, INDIANA ANTHOLOGY)

What the essay does: it compares how a poem and a musical reimagine the same mythic figure.

SOLUTION

Development: the thesis is unusually specific. One version of the god is strategic and unfeeling, the other emotionally broken and afraid, and both use myth to show how affection can slide into erasure. Structure is compact: introduction, close reading of the poem, close reading of the musical, comparison, conclusion.

Craft: the poem is cited by line number, so claims are checkable. Abstract nouns like agency and erasure sit next to concrete objects like mirrors and windows, and strong verbs carry the argument. A film-director comparison lets the reader see the character's control.

Effect and flaws: confident, authoritative voice. Weak spots: pronoun confusion about which version of the god is meant, and an ending that is more general than the body. Inference: lower comparative essays often say two works both explore a theme. This one names how they differ.

Step-by-Step

- 1 Pick a question, not a topic** Replace 'social media' with 'Should my school ban phones in class, and what would we lose?' A question forces a position.
- 2 Draft three candidate claims** Write one sentence per claim. Run each through the three tests in the key box. Delete any claim that fails.
- 3 List your evidence** For the winning claim, write every piece of evidence you can actually find or quote. If you have fewer than four, the claim is too big or too thin.
- 4 Find your angle** Ask what object, case, or comparison could only come from your experience or reading. Judges see hundreds of essays on the obvious book; they notice the unexpected one.
- 5 Write the thesis last in the intro** State it in one or two sentences at the end of your first paragraph so the reader knows the map.
- 6 Check the word budget** 500 to 3,000 words is the range. A claim needing 6,000 words must be narrowed, not rushed.

BEFORE AND AFTER 1: FROM TOPIC TO CLAIM

Weaker (coach sample): "This essay will discuss the effects of fast fashion on the environment and the economy."

SOLUTION

What changed: the weaker line announces a topic, names two vague effects, and takes no position. Nobody could disagree with it.

Stronger (coach sample): "Fast fashion is sold as cheap clothing, but its real price is paid by river towns downstream from dye factories, and a shopper who buys fewer, longer-lasting pieces does more good than one who recycles more."

Why it works: it names a specific cost, a specific victim, and a specific arguable solution. It also sets up a counterargument about recycling that the essay will need to answer.

BEFORE AND AFTER 2: THE OPENING

Weaker (coach sample): "Since the beginning of time, people have used stories to understand the world. In this essay I will look at one story and its meaning."

SOLUTION

What changed: the opening is a throat-clearing generalization with no object, no stake, and no claim.

Stronger (coach sample): "In the Momotaro tale, the childless couple who find a peach-born boy are not an accident of plot; they are a lesson about family lines. When the story is retold in wartime, the lesson changes shape."

Why it works: it begins with a concrete detail, makes an interpretive claim about it, and hints at the larger thesis (the tale is reshaped by its moment). This borrows the idea of reading a small detail closely, which the studied Gold Key essays on folktales and poems modeled; the sample lines are our own.

Tier Check

Scholastic publishes no rubric for critical essays and no tier percentages. The table below is coach's inference from the published winners we could read plus general craft judgment. It is a hypothesis, not an official standard.

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Gold Medal level	Silver Medal / Gold Key level	Honorable Mention / unrecognized	
Concept	A distinct, risky angle or object of study that feels like only this writer could have chosen it	A clear, defensible claim on a recognizable topic	A topic or a restated prompt with no position
Thesis	Specific, arguable, and sharpened as the essay goes	Arguable but broad	Descriptive or purely factual
Evidence	Concrete, varied, and explained in the writer's words	Relevant but illustrative rather than probing	Summary or general statements
Voice	Recognizable stakes and a controlled personal presence	Competent and clear	Generic or borrowed phrasing

Common traps

1. Announcing a topic instead of making a claim. 2. A claim so broad that no evidence could satisfy it. 3. Summarizing the plot or the history for most of the essay. 4. Starting with 'Since the dawn of time' or a dictionary definition.

Coach's Playbook

Before you draft, can you: state your claim in one sentence? Name one reader who would disagree? List four pieces of evidence? Say why you, specifically, care? If any answer is no, fix the plan before writing.

Do This Tonight

In 15 minutes, write five possible claims on a topic you know well. Mark which ones pass the three tests. Circle the one you would be proud to defend for 1,500 words and write one sentence on why a skeptic might push back.

Practice

WORKSHOP What a Critical Essay Is and What Judges Want

Write by hand or on a keyboard. Aim for a full draft, then revise once.

1. Write five possible critical-essay questions from your own life or reading. Underline the one you most want to answer.
2. Turn the underlined question into a one-sentence thesis. Run it through the three tests.
3. Take a report-style opening paragraph (yours or a classmate's) and rewrite it so it makes a claim by the end of the paragraph.
4. List three kinds of evidence you could gather for your thesis. Note one weakness each might have.
5. Read one published critical essay or review from a reputable outlet. Highlight the thesis, then write one sentence on what angle it chose.
6. Write a 150-word paragraph that begins with a concrete detail (an object, scene, or quote) and ends with an interpretive claim.
7. Choose two works on the same subject (two poems, two films, two news accounts). Write the single most interesting difference between them.
8. Draft a one-paragraph plan: your claim, the order of your three main points, and your strongest counterargument.
9. Write a short reflection: what does a personal stake add to an argument, and where could it go too far?

04.2 Thesis, Structure, and Evidence

A thesis is a contract and structure is how you keep it. Study how published Gold Key essays built arguments that develop, then practice explaining evidence and answering objections.

Why This Matters

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In the Critical Essay category, the thesis is the contract and the structure is the delivery. Scholastic's published criteria are originality, technical skill, and the emergence of a personal voice or vision, and it publishes no further rubric for this category. In our reading of regional Gold Key winners (coach's inference, not a Scholastic statement), the pieces that stood out tended to pair a sharp, arguable claim with an order of ideas that felt chosen rather than inherited. Sources go in the Citations and Footnotes box, which does not count toward your 500 to 3,000 words, and no particular citation style is required.

Students lose points in three predictable ways: a thesis that restates the prompt, body paragraphs in an order that could be shuffled without changing anything, and evidence that is dropped in and never explained. Grades 9 and 10 are generally expected to show a clear thesis, topic sentences, and quoted or cited support. Grades 11 and 12 are expected to show an argument that develops, meaning each section raises the stakes, answers an objection, or deepens the claim. Everything you submit must be your own work.

Core Ideas

A strong thesis does three jobs: it takes a position, it tells the reader why, and it implies a path. The thesis often lands at the end of the first paragraph or, in a longer piece, at the end of the first few. Gold Key essays we studied show the range: a proposal to change a word, a claim linking two centuries, a comparison of two versions of a myth, and an implied thesis in a reported piece that opened with a scene. The implied form is a risk; most writers should state the claim.

Thesis formula that works

[Subject] + [your stance] + [because / by / although] + [the reason or mechanism]. Example (coach sample): 'Although school lunch programs are praised for feeding children, they also teach students that food is something to finish quickly, and a longer lunch period would do more for health than any new menu.'

The paragraph engine (claim, evidence, explanation, link)

Claim: the point of this paragraph, tied to the thesis. Evidence: a quotation, statistic, example, or scene. Explanation: what the evidence proves, in your words. Link: how this raises the question for the next paragraph. Most weak paragraphs skip explanation.

Structure is a choice. Four common spines:

- ◆ **Chronological** (a tale or issue across eras): clean, but make each period a comparison against a baseline or it becomes a list.
- ◆ **Problem, harm, fix, stakes**: works for policy and persuasive essays; keep the fix proportional to the runaway.
- ◆ **Case by case** (one paragraph per text or figure): easy to follow, but add a closing paragraph that compares the cases or it feels mechanical.
- ◆ **Claim, counterargument, rebuttal**: raises credibility because it shows you tested your own idea.

Type of evidence	Best for	Watch out for
Direct quotation from a text	Literary and film analysis	Quoting without explaining
Statistic or study	Policy, science, health	Unattributed numbers; absolute claims
Historical or primary source	History, culture	Stretching one source across two claims
Personal anecdote or interview	Credibility and stakes	Letting one story carry a general claim
Concrete example or hypothetical	Making abstractions visible	Ignoring that a hypothetical is illustration, not proof

Case Studies

All essays below are regional Gold Key winners from Indiana's published anthologies, as reported in our research notes. Our analyses come from second-hand extractions, not verbatim copies, so use them as models for moves, not as sources for exact wording. We found no readable Silver Key or Honorable Mention essays, so tier contrasts are labeled inference.

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CASE STUDY 1: "NEVER AVERTING ONE'S EYES: HOW CINEMA TEACHES STUDENTS TO SEE" (REGIONAL GOLD KEY, 2026, INDIANA ANTHOLOGY)

The claim: film studies should be part of English classes because it builds media literacy, cross-cultural empathy, and engagement and inclusion.

SOLUTION

Development: a personal narrative frame comes first, with an extended underworld metaphor for the movie theater. The thesis closes paragraph three. Body paragraphs stack research-backed benefits, then the essay takes an explicit counterargument (film may move too fast for some learners) and rebuts it (subtitles, pausing, transcripts). The ending returns to the opening image.

Craft: the most disciplined paragraph introduces a source, quotes briefly, then unpacks the implication in the writer's own words. Long semicolon-and-dash sentences feel academic, though a chain of furthermore and moreover makes the logic mechanical.

Effect and flaws: the mirrored opening and close make a research-heavy argument feel authored. Weak spots by our reading: the word required outruns what the body proves, two paragraphs are overstuffed, and one source is overused. Inference: lower essays skip the counterargument, or only name it.

CASE STUDY 2: "VITAMIN C(YNICAL)" (REGIONAL GOLD KEY, 2024, INDIANA ANTHOLOGY)

The claim: supplements look like a reasonable habit but are lightly regulated, sometimes dangerous, and unnecessary for most people who eat well.

SOLUTION

Development: a personal supplement routine hooks the reader. Then regulation, concrete contamination cases (dated incidents, named hidden drugs, recall details), wellness-culture scams with two young victims, a fair concession (some people have real deficiencies), a three-part solution, and a short punchy close.

Craft: the best-integrated sourcing among the 2024 essays we studied. Each fact comes with a sentence on why it matters. Sentences run medium to long, with short emphatic ones for punch. Rhetorical questions and direct address keep a regulatory topic personal.

Effect and flaws: the specific cases make the reader's own kitchen cabinet feel implicated. Weaker points: citations sometimes cluster, a few absolutes overstate the research, and the sarcastic last line may cost credibility. Lesson: incident-level evidence beats a general statement that something is risky.

CASE STUDY 3: "FROM BATTLEFIELD TO BROKEN PROMISES: NATIVE AMERICANS IN WORLD WAR I" (REGIONAL GOLD KEY, 2026, INDIANA ANTHOLOGY)

The claim: Native service in the war was significant and a bid for acceptance, but the return brought continued denial of rights.

SOLUTION

Development: pre-war status, land policy, boarding schools as a pipeline to service, stereotypes, service and citizenship acts, citizenship that went unenforced, a trust relationship, a legal case, the born-warrior paradox, and a conclusion that returns to the title. The order moves from cause and effect toward irony.

Craft: this is the most research-heavy essay in the set. Historians, a federal report, a Native voice, and period images appear as evidence. The paragraph analyzing the visual sources is the strongest. Formal diction frames period terms as terms.

Effect and flaws: juxtaposition and irony lift a chronology into an argument. Weak spots: one therefore that doesn't follow, a thin legal-case paragraph resting on a single headline, and an unproved comparison in the intro. Lesson: variety of source type reads as research.

Step-by-Step

- 1 Write the thesis in the formula** Subject, stance, reason. If you cannot fill all three, you do not yet have an argument.
- 2 Choose the spine** Pick chronological, problem-fix, case-by-case, or claim-counterclaim. Sketch five to seven paragraph jobs, one line each.
- 3 Gather evidence by type** For each paragraph, find at least one piece of evidence and name its type. Mix types across the essay.
- 4 Add an objection** Write the best argument against you in one sentence. Give it a paragraph or a section with a rebuttal.
- 5 Draft with the paragraph engine** For each paragraph write claim, evidence, explanation, link. Underline your explanation sentence; if there isn't one, add it.

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- 6 Test the order** Cut each paragraph out (or list its job on a card) and shuffle. If the order doesn't matter, the structure is a list. Rebuild so each paragraph needs the one before.

BEFORE AND AFTER 1: EVIDENCE WITHOUT EXPLANATION

Weaker (coach sample): "Many teens are sleep-deprived. According to one study, 70 percent of teens do not get enough sleep. Schools should start later."

SOLUTION

What changed: the evidence is a dropped number with no source named and no reasoning. The leap from fact to demand is a jump, not a link.

Stronger (coach sample): "A national health survey cited by the CDC found most high schoolers sleeping fewer than the eight hours doctors recommend. That matters because teenage body clocks run later, so a 7:15 bell asks students to learn during the hours their brains are least ready. A later start does not give students more sleep by magic; it matches the school day to biology."

Why it works: the source is named in words, the figure is explained, and the final sentence gives the mechanism that turns a fact into a reason. (Check any real statistic against its source before using it.)

BEFORE AND AFTER 2: A LIST BECOMES AN ARGUMENT

Weaker (coach sample): "First, the Roman Empire fell because of economic problems. Second, it fell because of military problems. Third, it fell because of political problems."

SOLUTION

What changed: three parallel paragraphs, no order, no relationship among them. This is a list of causes, not a thesis.

Stronger (coach sample): "Rome did not fall to three separate problems; it fell to one loop. Money troubles forced emperors to pay soldiers with weaker coins, weaker coins made soldiers disloyal, and disloyal armies made the next emperor spend even more to buy their support."

Why it works: the thesis names a mechanism connecting the parts, so the body paragraphs now depend on one another and the order is no longer shufflable.

Tier Check

Scholastic publishes no rubric for structure or evidence and no tier percentages. The table is coach's inference from the Gold Key essays we could read; the lowest tiers are hypotheses, because we could not find readable Silver Key or Honorable Mention essays.

Gold Medal level	Silver Medal / Gold Key level	Honorable Mention / unrecognized	
Thesis	Specific and arguable, sharpened or complicated as the essay develops	Clear and arguable, stated once and then repeated	Announces a topic or restates the prompt
Structure	Each section depends on the last; includes a deliberate choice such as a counterargument, a hypothetical, or an echo ending	Logical but predictable; could be rearranged without much loss	Five-paragraph template; paragraphs interchangeable
Evidence	Varied types, integrated, explained; sources named	Relevant but mainly illustrative	Few facts; general claims; unattributed numbers
Counterargument	Engaged and answered in a paragraph	Mentioned briefly	Absent or caricatured

Common traps

1. Evidence that is quoted or cited but never explained. 2. Five parallel paragraphs that could be reordered. 3. A counterargument stated in a single sentence and waved away. 4. Large statistics with no source named, even if you have the link in your Citations box.

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Coach's Playbook

Does the thesis name a stance and a reason? Does each paragraph begin with a claim tied to the thesis? Is there at least one explanation sentence per piece of evidence? Is there a counterargument with a real answer? Does each paragraph need the one before it? Are all sources listed in the Citations and Footnotes box?

Do This Tonight

Take your current draft or a one-page practice essay. Write each paragraph's job on an index card or line. Shuffle them. If the essay still works, rewrite the thesis so it names a relationship among the parts, then reorder.

Practice

WORKSHOP Thesis, Structure, and Evidence

Write by hand or on a keyboard. Aim for a full draft, then revise once.

1. Write a thesis using the formula (subject, stance, reason) on a topic from this week's news. Revise until a classmate could disagree with it.
2. Take a dropped-in statistic you've seen in an essay or article and write a three-sentence version that names the source, explains the number, and states what it proves.
3. Choose one spine (chronological, problem-fix, case-by-case, claim-counterclaim) for an essay you could write. Outline it in seven lines.
4. Write the strongest argument against your thesis in the voice of someone who truly believes it. Then write a rebuttal paragraph.
5. Read an op-ed or review. Label each paragraph's job in a margin note. Note the paragraph you could move without loss.
6. Rewrite a list of three parallel causes as a single mechanism, as in the Rome sample.
7. Write two paragraphs using the paragraph engine on the same thesis, one with a quotation and one with a statistic.
8. Find a hypothetical or scenario you could invent to make an abstract harm concrete. Write it in 100 words and label it as hypothetical.
9. Compare two essay endings. Which returns to an earlier image or idea, and what does that return add?

04.3 Style, Tone, and Rhetorical Moves

Voice is how a reader decides to trust you. See how Gold Key essays used hypotheticals, metaphor, and form analysis, then practice sentence variety, fair concessions, and echo endings.

Why This Matters

Scholastic names three things it looks for: originality, technical skill, and the emergence of a personal voice or vision. In a critical essay, voice is not decoration. It is how a reader decides whether to trust you. The program publishes no detailed rubric for style, so everything here about what tends to stand out is coach's inference from the Gold Key essays we could read, not a Scholastic statement. Essays run 500 to 3,000 words, and sources go in the Citations and Footnotes box.

Where students lose points: they inflate their prose to sound academic, so every sentence starts with Furthermore or Moreover; they swing between formal and chatty without meaning to; or they use rhetorical devices as ornaments instead of tools. Grades 9 and 10 are generally expected to write clear, correct, varied sentences in a consistent tone. Grades 11 and 12 are expected to use tone and rhetorical choices deliberately, so a reader can say why a particular sentence is short or why a metaphor returns. Your final essay must be your own writing in your own voice.

Core Ideas

Tone is the attitude your prose takes toward the subject and the reader. Style is the pattern of choices (sentence length, diction, devices) that creates the tone. Rhetoric is the set of moves that persuade. In the Gold Key essays we studied, the most memorable pieces made visible choices: a vivid opening metaphor that returned at the end, a hypothetical future scene to make a harm concrete, a coined phrase to name a feeling, or sensory detail in an essay about economics.

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The three appeals, in plain language

Logos: reasoning and evidence. Ethos: why the reader should trust you (expertise, fairness, personal stake). Pathos: what the reader should feel. Strong essays use all three, with logos carrying the load.

Sentence variety rule

If three sentences in a row have the same length or opening, change one. Long sentences carry explanation; a short one delivers the verdict. Fragments work only when you can name the reason you chose one.

Device	What it does	Risk
Extended metaphor	Gives a long argument one image to hold	Overextending until it distorts the facts
Hypothetical scenario	Makes an abstract harm concrete	Reading as proof when it is only illustration
Anaphora and triads	Builds rhythm and emphasis	Overuse; every list becomes three items
Rhetorical question	Pulls the reader into the problem	Asking questions you never answer
Concession	Builds ethos by being fair	Conceding so much that your claim vanishes
Echo ending	Gives a feeling of design	Repeating the opening without changing its meaning

Diction is word choice. Precise nouns and strong verbs beat piled-up adjectives. Abstract nouns (agency, erasure, influence) are useful in analysis but need concrete companions. Hedging (can be seen as, may suggest) shows caution; hedging every sentence shows lack of conviction.

Case Studies

All pieces are regional Gold Key winners in Indiana anthologies, per our research. Analyses come from second-hand extractions, so we paraphrase and avoid line-level claims. We could not read Silver Key or Honorable Mention essays; tier contrasts are inference.

CASE STUDY 1: "BEYOND THE GRAVE: THE ETHICS AND PROMISES OF DIGITAL IMMORTALITY" (REGIONAL GOLD KEY, 2026, INDIANA ANTHOLOGY)

The claim: digital immortality needs ethical and legal safeguards before it spreads, because rushing risks confusion over identity, consent, privacy, legal fights, and social disruption.

SOLUTION

Development: definition and examples, thesis in paragraph three, then an invented scene set in 2050 in which siblings argue over an avatar of their mother. A fair account of benefits follows, including the author's own wish to know ancestors who died before they were born. Harms come in sequence: consent and identity, psychological, then social, economic, and corporate. The ending closes on a triad.

Craft: the hypothetical makes abstract harms visible. A coined concept, a second loss when a service shuts down, anchors the psychological section. Diction is precise and technical; the opening sentence is long and dash-heavy.

Effect and flaws: fairness to benefits builds ethos before the warnings begin. Weaknesses: repeated points across paragraphs and citation labels that do not match the bibliography. Inference: lower essays argue one side and list risks. This one imagines a scene and hears the other side.

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CASE STUDY 2: "A COPING PERSON'S GUIDE TO GRIEVING" (REGIONAL GOLD KEY, 2026, INDIANA ANTHOLOGY)

What it does: a literary analysis of a verse novel about grief and gun violence, arguing that grief is not linear and that how people respond shapes what comes next.

SOLUTION

Development: a rhetorical question opens the piece. Three paragraphs follow, one per ghost-guide character, then a paragraph on the book's formal devices, then a conclusion. The structure is clean but a little mechanical.

Craft: the strongest paragraph treats imagery, sound words, and typographic layout as evidence of how form carries meaning. The best evidence is a moment where the protagonist cannot say the word that would name the act. The voice is earnest and reflective and often says we.

Effect and flaws: analysis of form (how the page looks and sounds) is what lifts a theme essay. Weak spots: repeated connectors such as Also and Similarly, and assertions about what a character feels that the text does not show. Inference: lower essays on novels typically stop at character and theme.

CASE STUDY 3: "BITTERSWEET: THE GRUESOME PRICE FOR WEST AFRICA'S MOST DECADENT EXPORT" (REGIONAL GOLD KEY, 2026, INDIANA ANTHOLOGY)

What it does: an issue-driven argument about child labor in the cocoa trade, entered as a critical essay but reading like a reported feature. No explicit thesis is stated; the opening scene and a sharpened paragraph five imply one.

SOLUTION

Development: an opening scene with a named teenage worker, then economics, a recruitment pipeline across a border, corporate pledges and loopholes, the paradox that industry can trace flavor but not labor, reforms and their limits, direct testimony, the root cause in consumer demand, and a circular close.

Craft: sensory, emotive diction; short fragments land hard; a parallel closing sentence in the testimony paragraph; and personified tools at the end. Juxtaposition of comfort and labor does the persuading.

Effect and flaws: a named human being gives statistics a face. Weaknesses: heavy reliance on a single investigation, blame that shifts from corporations to consumers without reconciling them, and typos. Lesson: this shows the category tolerates a reported, evidence-heavy style, but an unstated thesis is a risk most writers should avoid.

Step-by-Step

- 1 Name your tone in three words** Authoritative and warm. Wry but fair. Urgent and precise. Write it above your draft and check each paragraph against it.
- 2 Mark your sentence lengths** Write S, M, or L above each sentence in one paragraph. Break long runs of the same size. Put your best claim in a sentence whose length differs from its neighbors.
- 3 Choose one anchor device** A metaphor, a hypothetical, or a concrete opening scene. Plan where it opens and where it returns.
- 4 Swap abstractions for pairs** Wherever you have a big abstract noun, add a concrete object next to it.
- 5 Cut connector chains** Delete half of the furthermore, moreover, and additionally. If the logic breaks, the transition was hiding a gap, so fix the gap.
- 6 Read it aloud** Mark every spot where you stumble or run out of breath. Those are sentences to split or simplify.

BEFORE AND AFTER 1: SENTENCE VARIETY AND DICTION

Weaker (coach sample): "Social media has a big impact on teenagers. It is very bad for their mental health. It also affects their sleep. Furthermore, it is addictive."

SOLUTION

What changed: four similar sentences, vague adjectives, and a mechanical connector.

Stronger (coach sample): "Open any teenager's phone at midnight and you will find the evidence: the glow, the scroll, the sleep that never starts. Social media does not merely distract. It rewrites the hours a growing brain needs for repair."

Why it works: a concrete scene replaces vague adjectives, two short sentences deliver the claim, and the verb rewrites carries the argument.

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BEFORE AND AFTER 2: A HYPOTHETICAL THAT EARNS ITS PLACE

Weaker (coach sample): "Facial recognition can invade privacy and cause problems for many people in the future."

SOLUTION

What changed: the sentence states a harm in the abstract and the reader feels nothing.

Stronger (coach sample): "Picture a girl walking into a pharmacy, camera above the door matching her face to a database she never agreed to join. By the time she reaches the counter, a stranger knows her name, her address, and what she is about to buy."

Why it works: it builds a scene with a person and a consequence. Flag it in your essay as a scenario, so the reader knows it illustrates the risk and your evidence proves it.

Tier Check

There is no published rubric for style. The table is coach's inference from Gold Key essays we could read, and the lower tiers are hypotheses.

Gold Medal level	Silver Medal / Gold Key level	Honorable Mention / unrecognized	
Voice	Recognizable and consistent, with a stake the reader can feel	Clear and competent, with moments of personality	Generic, borrowed, or inflated
Sentence craft	Deliberate variety; short sentences placed for impact	Mostly correct, somewhat uniform	Repetitive structures or run-ons
Devices	One or two anchor choices that return and change meaning	Occasional devices without a plan	Ornament or none
Tone	Fair to opponents; confident without overreaching	Even but sometimes overstated	Shifts between slang and stiffness without reason

Common traps

1. Transition chains (Furthermore, Moreover) used to fake logic. 2. Sarcasm in the last line that costs you credibility. 3. A metaphor that is introduced and forgotten. 4. Mixing casual slang and formal diction without a reason.

Coach's Playbook

Can you describe your tone in three words? Is there one anchor device with a plan for its return? Do your sentence lengths vary? Is each abstract noun paired with a concrete one? Have you read it aloud? Are any absolutes (always, never, everyone) really true?

Do This Tonight

Print or copy the first page of your draft. Highlight each sentence opening in a color by type (subject, transition, question). Rewrite any three that begin the same way, then read the page aloud.

Practice**WORKSHOP Style, Tone, and Rhetorical Moves**

Write by hand or on a keyboard. Aim for a full draft, then revise once.

1. Describe the tone of a critical essay you admire in three words. Cite one sentence that creates it, paraphrased.
2. Rewrite a paragraph that is full of furthermore and moreover so that the logic is carried by repetition of key words instead.
3. Write one hypothetical scenario (80 to 120 words) that shows a harm from an issue you care about. Label it.
4. Choose an extended metaphor for a topic. Write the opening sentence, and a note on where it will return and how its meaning will change.
5. Take one paragraph. Mark each sentence S, M, or L. Rewrite so that the key sentence stands out by length.

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6.

Write a sentence that pairs an abstract noun (such as freedom or erasure) with a concrete object.
7.

Write a concession paragraph (3 to 5 sentences) that grants an opponent a real point and then answers it.
8.

Compare two versions of a sentence, one hedged heavily and one confident. Decide which is more accurate and why.
9.

Revise an essay ending that repeats the introduction so that it returns to the opening image but means something new.

04.4

Revision, Citations, and Common Failures

Most Gold Key essays still had flaws, so revision is where you gain ground. Run four passes, audit your sources, fix leaps and overstatements, and check the official rules before you submit.

Why This Matters

A critical essay is rarely won in the first draft. Scholastic's criteria are originality, technical skill, and the emergence of a personal voice or vision, and technical skill includes whether your claims are sourced and your logic holds. The program publishes no rubric for revision or citation. What we can say, as coach's inference from the Gold Key essays we studied, is that nearly every one had visible flaws, such as unsourced statistics, a chronology slip, a therefore that did not follow, or typos. Strong concept and voice appeared to outweigh polish. That is good news and a warning: you do not need a flawless essay, but each flaw you fix is one less reason to lose a close call. Official facts to build into your plan: Critical Essay entries run 500 to 3,000 words; sources go in the Citations and Footnotes box (not counted toward the limit); no particular citation style is required, so pick one and use it consistently. Entries open October 1, 2026; regional deadlines start December 1, 2026 and vary, some as late as January 4, 2027, and you may edit until your regional deadline. Check your own region's date. The fee is 15 dollars per individual entry, with a fee waiver available on self-certified need. No name or identifying information may appear in the manuscript. Type or paste your essay directly into the Portal text box; PDFs and hyperlinks cannot be reviewed by judges. Write primarily in English. Each work may be entered in only one category. The final work must be your own idea and creation, and entrants must disclose any AI use in brainstorming, outlining, or research as the rules require.

Core Ideas

Revision is not proofreading. It is re-seeing the essay at four levels, from biggest to smallest. Fix the big level before the small one, or you will polish sentences you later delete.

The four passes

Pass 1, Argument: Is the thesis arguable and specific, and does every paragraph serve it? Pass 2, Structure: Does each section need the one before? Is the counterargument answered? Pass 3, Evidence: Is every claim sourced, every source explained, every number checked? Pass 4, Sentences and mechanics: variety, diction, grammar, typos, formatting.

Citation basics for this category

List every source in the Citations and Footnotes box, whatever style you choose (MLA, APA, Chicago, or a consistent simple format). Match every in-text label to a box entry. Name key sources in words in the essay when a claim depends on them. Keep a working list while you research, not at the end.

Failure	How to spot it	Fix
Unsourced statistic	A number with no name attached	Find the source and add it, or delete the number
Mismatched labels	In-text label not in the citations box	Compare both lists line by line
Overstated claim	Words like always, never, proves, everyone	Qualify to match what the evidence shows
Logical leap	A therefore with no reasoning	Add the missing step or soften the link
Stretched source	One source supports two different claims	Find a second source or narrow the claim
Stray identifiers	Your name or school in the text	Remove all identifying information

Case Studies

The Gold Key essays below are real, but the point of these case studies is how a strong concept survives imperfect execution and where revision would have helped. Analyses come from second-hand extractions, so we are cautious about details; none of these notes is a Scholastic evaluation.

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CASE STUDY 1: "JAPAN'S SOCIO-POLITICAL INFLUENCE ON MOMOTARO" (REGIONAL GOLD KEY, 2024, INDIANA ANTHOLOGY)

What it does: argues that shifting Japanese political and cultural conditions repeatedly reshaped both a folktale and how it is used.

SOLUTION

Development: a strict chronology, with a baseline of the tale and its plot, an Edo-era Confucian context, Meiji modernization, militarized retellings, wartime film, a leftist rewrite, and a synthesis. Each period is a comparison against the baseline, which keeps the chronology from becoming a list.

Craft: the strongest move is a close reading connecting a childless couple in the tale to Confucian ideas about family lines. Sentences are long and topic-first. The voice is hedged and impersonal, which reads as scholarly caution.

Revision lessons: origin and written-form dates are muddled, one source stretches across two claims, one paragraph crams two adaptations and then refers confusingly to the former of the two films, and a large casualty figure is unsourced. Inference: lower essays would summarize the plot and list eras. This one analyzes a detail and includes a counter-usage that shows the tale is flexible.

CASE STUDY 2: "PETALS OF DEATH" (REGIONAL GOLD KEY, 2024, INDIANA ANTHOLOGY)

What it does: traces the opium poppy through two centuries to argue that human greed connects the opium wars with the modern opioid epidemic.

SOLUTION

Development: sensory portrait and myth, botany bridge, two war narratives, a pivot to the modern crisis, an accountability section, and a coda that circles back.

Craft: triads and parallel structure across episodes; a lyrical-to-casual register swing.

Revision lessons: the historical half is better sourced than the modern half, where a death count, a family fortune figure, and a litigation status have no citation. A section heading contains a chronology slip, a causal link is asserted rather than analyzed, and a botany paragraph is underused. A single revision pass for sources and dates would have made a strong concept sturdier.

CASE STUDY 3: "THE WORD CHOICE OF HATRED" (REGIONAL GOLD KEY, 2024, INDIANA ANTHOLOGY)

What it does: proposes retiring a term and replacing it with new ones.

SOLUTION

Development: a long runway of context and harm before a short fix section; the ending refuses to resolve.

Craft: strong rhythm, voice shifts between I, you, and we, and visual stanzas that dramatize irrational fear.

Revision lessons: no bibliography appears in the reproduced text, several statistics are unattributed, and the novelty of the proposal outruns its defense. The lesson: wherever the argument depends on a new idea, such as the coined replacement terms, the reasoning must be demonstrably yours and defended in full. Remember that final work must be your own, and document your process.

Step-by-Step

- 1 Rest the draft** Wait at least a day. Fresh eyes find the gaps you could not see.
- 2 Reverse outline** Write one line per paragraph describing what it does. Check each against your thesis.
- 3 Source audit** Highlight every fact, number, and quotation. Beside each, write its source. Delete or fix any with none.
- 4 Answer the objection** Reread your counterargument. Is the opponent's best point answered? Add a rebuttal or soften your claim.
- 5 Sentence pass** Read aloud; cut filler, break run-ons, vary openings, and replace weak verbs.
- 6 Final package check** Remove your name and school, check the word range, confirm sources are in the Citations box, paste directly into the Portal text box, and review the formatting preview. Edit only until your regional deadline.

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BEFORE AND AFTER 1: OVERSTATED CLAIM AND MISSING SOURCE

Weaker (coach sample): "Everyone knows video games make teens violent. Studies prove this."

SOLUTION

What changed: everyone knows is a bandwagon claim, studies is unnamed, and prove overstates. A knowledgeable judge would stop trusting the writer.

Stronger (coach sample): "Public fear that video games cause violence has outlasted the evidence. A review by a major psychological association found links to aggressive play but not to criminal violence, which suggests the real question is how games shape behavior, not whether they turn teens into criminals."

Why it works: the claim is qualified to match the evidence, the source is described in words (and goes in the Citations box), and the thesis grows from a nuance rather than an absolute. Verify any real review before citing it.

BEFORE AND AFTER 2: A LOGICAL LEAP

Weaker (coach sample): "The school added a new cafeteria. Therefore, test scores will rise."

SOLUTION

What changed: the connection between the two facts is assumed. The reader is asked to believe something without a path.

Stronger (coach sample): "The new cafeteria cut the lunch line from twenty-five minutes to ten. Students who once ate in a rush now have time to eat, and research on school meals links regular lunch with better afternoon attention. Test scores may follow, though the cafeteria alone will not guarantee it."

Why it works: it names the mechanism, ties it to a type of evidence, and ends with a calibrated claim.

Tier Check

There is no published rubric for revision or citation. The table is coach's inference from Gold Key essays we could read, and the lower tiers are hypotheses because we found no readable Silver Key or Honorable Mention essays.

Gold Medal level	Silver Medal / Gold Key level	Honorable Mention / unrecognized	
Claims	Calibrated to the evidence; qualified where needed	Mostly supported; a few overstatements	Absolutes; unsupported assertions
Sourcing	Named, varied, and listed in the Citations box; labels match	Present but uneven; a few gaps	Few or no sources; unattributed numbers
Revision signs	A concept clearly pushed through multiple drafts	Cleaned but not rethought	First draft with spelling fixes
Mechanics	Clean enough that errors do not distract	A few distracting errors	Frequent errors or formatting problems

Common traps

1. Unsourced statistics, especially in the modern or current-events half. 2. In-text labels that do not match the Citations box. 3. Leaving your name, school, or other identifying information in the file or text. 4. Submitting a PDF or hyperlinks instead of pasting text into the Portal box.

Coach's Playbook

Four passes in order: argument, structure, evidence, sentences. Reverse outline once. Source audit once. Read aloud once. Check the rules once: word range, no identifying information, one category, sources in the box, AI use disclosed if applicable, your own work.

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Do This Tonight

Spend 15 minutes on a source audit. Highlight every number, quotation, and factual claim in your draft. Write the source in the margin. Delete or fix any that have none.

Practice

WORKSHOP Revision, Citations, and Common Failures

Write by hand or on a keyboard. Aim for a full draft, then revise once.

1. Write a reverse outline of a draft essay: one sentence per paragraph. Circle any paragraph whose job overlaps another.
2. Do a source audit on a page of an essay you wrote. List every claim with no source and fix or cut three.
3. Find three absolutes (always, never, everyone, proves) in your draft or a model essay and rewrite each to match the evidence.
4. Compare your in-text labels with your Citations list. List mismatches and correct them.
5. Take a logical leap from your writing or a sample and add the missing step.
6. Write a one-paragraph rebuttal to the best objection against your thesis.
7. Pick one citation style (MLA, APA, or Chicago) and format five sources. Note one detail that is easy to forget.
8. Read your essay aloud, mark every stumble, and revise at least ten sentences.
9. Complete the final package checklist for your essay: word count, identifying information, sources, category, AI disclosure if used, and a plain-text paste check.

04.5 Bonus Lab: Annotated Draft Clinic for the Critical Essay

Read a complete original coach essay in three parts, see how each part develops, is organized, and is worded, then run your own draft through a six-pass revision plan.

Why This Matters

This bonus lab is a clinic, not a lecture. You will read one complete critical essay written by your coach, in three parts, and watch each part get opened up: how the claim develops, how the paragraphs are ordered, how the sentences are built, which words carry weight, and which devices shape the ending. Then you will run your own draft through a six-pass revision plan. The goal is to make the invisible moves visible so you can copy the method, never the words.

A reminder about status. The essay below is **Coach's sample (original, not a Scholastic winner)**. It was written for teaching, it has not been judged by anyone, and it is deliberately shorter than a 500 to 3,000 word entry so the analysis can sit beside it. Scholastic publishes only three criteria for every category, originality, technical skill, and the emergence of a personal voice or vision, so the commentary here is a coach's reading, not a rubric. Your own entry must be entirely your own idea and your own writing.

The Clinic Sample

Title: **The Quiet Cost of the Group Chat Deadline**. Claim: school group projects should stop using shared messaging threads as the main place where work gets assigned. Read each part, then read the diagnosis under it.

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PART 1: THE OPENING AND THE CLAIM (COACH'S SAMPLE, ORIGINAL, NOT A SCHOLASTIC WINNER)

On the night before our history project was due, my group chat had 214 unread messages and zero finished slides. Everyone had been working. Nobody could prove it. Our teacher likes group chats because they leave a record, and a record sounds like fairness. But a record is not the same as a plan, and a thread that moves faster than anyone can read does not hold people accountable. It hides them. Schools that assign collaborative work should stop treating the group chat as the project's headquarters and require a single shared task list with names and dates instead.

SOLUTION

Development: the opening is a concrete scene with a number, which gives the reader something to picture before any abstraction arrives. The scene then turns into a contradiction (everyone worked, nobody could prove it), and the contradiction sets up the thesis as a solution. The claim lands in the last sentence of the paragraph, where a reader expects it, and it is specific: it names who should act (schools), what they should stop doing, and what they should do instead.

Organization and syntax: the paragraph runs from story to problem to proposal in six sentences. Short sentences carry the punches (Nobody could prove it. It hides them.), while the longest sentence holds the reasoning and ends on a balanced contrast. Notice the thesis is a single long sentence because it has to carry a stance, a target, and a remedy.

Diction and devices: record, plan, and headquarters are the key words, and the essay will keep using them so the argument has a vocabulary. The device is a reversal in the middle of the paragraph: a record sounds like fairness, but it is not a plan. That small turn tells a judge the writer is thinking against an easy assumption instead of repeating it.

PART 2: THE EVIDENCE AND THE COUNTERARGUMENT (COACH'S SAMPLE, ORIGINAL, NOT A SCHOLASTIC WINNER)

Defenders of the thread will say it is flexible, and it is. Flexibility is its charm and its flaw. When a task is announced inside a stream of jokes, replies, and photos, it can be missed by the person it was meant for, and the person who posted it assumes it was received. In our group, two tasks were claimed twice and one was claimed by no one, which I only know because I counted them afterward. Compare that with a task list: one line, one name, one date. If the line is blank, the problem is visible to everyone at once. The best evidence for the list is not that it is stricter. It is that it makes silence easy to see.

SOLUTION

Development: the paragraph opens by naming the opposing view fairly (the thread is flexible, and it is) and then reframes the strength as the weakness. That is a concession followed by a turn, one of the most reliable moves in argument. The evidence is small and personal, three tasks from one group, and the essay admits how it was gathered. Admitting the limits of a source is a technical-skill signal, not a weakness.

Organization and syntax: the sequence is objection, reframe, example, comparison, conclusion of the paragraph. Sentence length changes with the job: a long middle sentence listing jokes, replies, and photos mimics the clutter it describes, and then the task-list sentence compresses to one line, one name, one date. The syntax acts out the claim.

Diction and devices: charm and flaw sit side by side in a balanced pair. Silence is the paragraph's most original word choice, because it moves the argument from who did what to what a system lets you see. Inference from reading published essays, not a Scholastic statement: pieces that stand out tend to coin one such reframing term and then keep using it.

PART 3: THE ENDING (COACH'S SAMPLE, ORIGINAL, NOT A SCHOLASTIC WINNER)

None of this means a teacher should ban the chat. Friends will always talk where they talk, and some of that talk is where ideas begin. The change is smaller: let the thread be the hallway and make the list the room where the work is signed for. On the night before our deadline, one of us finally typed the whole plan into a single document, with names. It took nine minutes. We should have started there. A record shows that something happened. A list shows who will make it happen, and by when.

SOLUTION

Development: the ending does three jobs in order. It limits the claim (no ban), which protects the writer from the charge of overreaching. It offers a metaphor (hallway and room) that makes the proposal easy to remember. It then returns to the opening night, so the essay closes the loop it opened, with a small detail (nine minutes) that proves the fix was cheap.

Syntax and diction: the last two sentences are parallel (A record shows... A list shows...) and the repeated word record from the first paragraph returns on purpose. The final phrase and by when quietly restates the thesis as a promise.

Effect: the ending does not announce a conclusion or repeat the thesis word for word. It lets a reader feel the argument finish. Weaker endings in the same position usually say in conclusion and summarize; this one trusts the image.

What Changed From Draft to Draft

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A first draft of this sample opened with the sentence Group projects are an important part of school life. It was true, safe, and forgettable, so the scene with the 214 messages replaced it. The first thesis also said group chats are bad, which fails the specific test, and it was narrowed to one target (the chat as headquarters) and one remedy (a shared list with names and dates). The counterargument paragraph was added after a reader asked, but what about flexibility? That question became Part 2.

Element	Weak first draft	Revised sample
Opening	General statement about school	Scene with a number
Thesis	Group chats are bad	Name the target, the stance, and the remedy
Evidence	Opinion repeated three ways	Counted tasks, explained
Opponent	Ignored	Conceded fairly, then reframed
Ending	Summary of points	Limit, image, return to the opening

Use that table as a diagnostic on your own draft. Find the row where your essay looks like the left column, and start your revision there rather than with the sentences you like best.

The Revision Pass Plan

Revise in passes, one job at a time. Reading for everything at once is why drafts stay the same after an hour of work. Do the passes in this order, because each one changes what the next one needs.

- 1 Pass 1: The claim** Underline your thesis. Apply the three tests: arguable, specific, provable. If a reader could not name who should do what, rewrite it until they could.
- 2 Pass 2: The map** Write one sentence per paragraph, stating what that paragraph proves. Reorder until each sentence builds on the one before it. Cut any paragraph whose sentence does not support the claim.
- 3 Pass 3: The evidence** Mark every fact, example, or quotation. Beside each, write the sentence that explains why it matters. Evidence with no explanation is decoration.
- 4 Pass 4: The opponent** Find the strongest objection a smart skeptic would raise. Answer it in your own words, fairly, in at least one full paragraph or a clear part of one.
- 5 Pass 5: The sentences** Read aloud. Vary length on purpose, replace vague nouns and weak verbs, and delete filler such as it is important to note. Check that your key terms repeat consistently.
- 6 Pass 6: The edges** Rewrite the first and last paragraphs last. Make the opening concrete, make the ending add something, and check citations, word count, and formatting.

Annotated Draft Checklist

My thesis names a stance, a target, and a remedy or reason.
 Each paragraph has one job that I can state in a sentence.
 Every piece of evidence is followed by my own explanation.
 I answered a real objection, not a weak one I invented.
 I coined or sharpened one key term and used it consistently.
 My ending adds a limit, an image, or a return, and does not just repeat.
 Every source is listed in the Citations and Footnotes box.

Coach's Warning

Do not imitate the sample's topic, its metaphors, or its phrasing. Judges read hundreds of pieces; the ones that stand out come from something only you noticed. Use the method (concrete opening, fair objection, limited claim, returning ending) and bring your own subject.

Do This Tonight

Take your current draft and do Pass 2 only. Write one sentence per paragraph on a sheet of paper, then number the sentences in the order you think they should appear. If the order changes, move the paragraphs. Fifteen minutes, no polishing.

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WORKSHOP Bonus Lab: Annotated Draft Clinic for the Critical Essay

Write by hand or on a keyboard. Aim for a full draft, then revise once.

1. Rewrite the sample's thesis sentence so that it targets a different audience (a student council, a parent group) while keeping the stance and remedy. Notice what changes.
2. Write your own one-paragraph opening that begins with a concrete scene and ends with an arguable thesis. Mark the sentence where the scene turns into a problem.
3. Find the concession in Part 2 of the sample. Write a similar concession-and-turn for your own topic, naming the opposing view fairly.
4. Choose a key term you could repeat across your essay (like record or silence). Write three sentences using it in three different paragraphs.
5. Take a paragraph of your own and mark each sentence as claim, evidence, or explanation. Rewrite so no evidence appears without an explanation.
6. Write two versions of your last paragraph: one that summarizes and one that returns to your opening image. Choose one and say why.
7. List three limits you could put on your claim so it is provable in your word count. Rewrite your thesis with the best limit.
8. Run Pass 5 on one page of your draft. Count how many sentences begin the same way, then vary at least four of them.
9. Read your essay to someone and ask them to state your claim in their own words. Record what they said and how it differs from what you meant.

Notes Coaching Notes and Model Responses

What a strong response to each assignment looks like, and why. Compare after you draft, not before.

04.1 What a Critical Essay Is and What Judges Want**WORKSHOP · WHAT A CRITICAL ESSAY IS AND WHAT JUDGES WANT**

1. Coaching note: the question you underline should make you slightly nervous because you are not sure of the answer. Good questions begin with should, why, or how, and they have more than one reasonable answer.
2. Model: 'Schools should replace most homework with in-class practice because homework mainly rewards families who have time and quiet to spare.' It is arguable, specific, and provable with research and interviews.
3. Coaching note: look at your first four sentences. If none contains an opinion, add one, then cut the sentence that only describes. The claim belongs at the end of the paragraph.
4. Model: survey data (weak: small sample), a historian's analysis (weak: may reflect one school of thought), a personal case (weak: not typical). Naming weaknesses early lets you answer them in the essay.
5. Coaching note: your sentence should name the angle, for example 'it compares two decades of data instead of one event.' If you can't name an angle, the piece may be a report.
6. Model: 'The cracked chalkboard in room 12 still says Do Not Erase, though no one remembers why. That faded warning is a small monument to how schools preserve rules long after reasons vanish.' Detail first, then claim.
7. Coaching note: the best difference is about choice, not fact. Not 'one is longer' but 'one hides the villain's motive while the other explains it.' That difference can be your thesis.
8. Model: Claim - public libraries deserve funding as civic infrastructure. Points - access, community, economic return. Counter - digital tools make libraries obsolete; reply - the digital divide.
9. Coaching note: a personal stake works as credibility when it connects directly to evidence. It goes too far when the essay becomes about you instead of the question. Ask: does my anecdote prove or only illustrate?

04.2 Thesis, Structure, and Evidence**WORKSHOP · THESIS, STRUCTURE, AND EVIDENCE**

1. Coaching note: your thesis should survive the so-what test. If the reason clause could be cut without changing the claim, the reason is not doing work. Example: 'Because teens cannot judge sources, schools should teach lateral reading as a required unit.'
2. Model: 'A national survey by a public health agency found that most high schoolers sleep less than recommended. That means the problem is common, not individual, and it supports a school-wide fix.' Name, explain, link.
3. Coaching note: problem-fix works best for policy; case-by-case works for texts. Your seven lines should each be a verb phrase: 'show', 'complicate', 'answer', 'conclude'.
4. Coaching note: a fair opponent concedes something real. Model: 'Critics are right that later start times complicate sports practice. But a schedule that works for coaches cannot be the reason students lose sleep.'
5. Coaching note: if you can swap two paragraphs freely, the essay is a list. Mark the places where one paragraph answers a question that the previous one raised; those are the load-bearing links.

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6. Model: 'Each cause fed the next: debased coins, restless soldiers, expensive loyalty.' The word fed names the mechanism; that verb is your thesis in miniature.
7. Coaching note: in both, the explanation sentence must begin with a verb like shows, reveals, or suggests, or a phrase like which means. Underline it. If you can't, add one.
8. Model: 'Imagine a grandmother's voice, recreated from her old messages, telling a grandchild to forgive a family dispute she never resolved. Who decided what she would say?' Labeling keeps it honest.
9. Coaching note: an echo ending reframes the opening; it should not simply repeat it. The best ones change meaning because of what the reader learned. Ask what changed.

04.3 Style, Tone, and Rhetorical Moves

WORKSHOP · STYLE, TONE, AND RHETORICAL MOVES

1. Coaching note: avoid vague words like good or interesting. Words like wry, urgent, patient, or precise are measurable. Link each to a sentence feature, such as short sentences for urgency.
2. Model: replace 'Furthermore, the cost is high' with 'That cost rises with each missed class. And the missed class is where the gap begins.' Repetition of cost and class connects the sentences without a stock transition.
3. Model: 'In 2050, two siblings sit before a screen where their mother, long gone, answers questions. One asks her to forgive. The other begs her not to. Who owns her voice?' Labeling it hypothetical keeps your evidence honest.
4. Model: 'A library is a lantern we pass down.' Return: at the end, the lantern is dimmed by budget cuts, so the same image now carries loss. The meaning must change; otherwise it is only repetition.
5. Coaching note: a short sentence after two long ones is a verdict. Check that the claim, not the filler, gets the emphasis.
6. Model: 'Her agency ended at the bedroom window, a pane she could see through but not open.' The window makes the abstraction visible.
7. Model: 'Skeptics are right that private donors can chase trends instead of needs. But a funding system that depends on public attention is exactly the problem a stable public budget would solve.' Grant, then reframe.
8. Coaching note: hedging is honest when the evidence is mixed and cowardly when it is strong. Choose the version that matches your evidence.
9. Model: if you opened with a lantern in a dark theater, close with the same lantern and a new meaning: 'the light was never the film; it was the audience.' Echo plus change feels designed.

04.4 Revision, Citations, and Common Failures

WORKSHOP · REVISION, CITATIONS, AND COMMON FAILURES

1. Coaching note: if two paragraphs make the same point, merge them and spend the new space on a counterargument or a deeper example. Good outlines show forward motion.
2. Model: 'Large numbers of teens quit sports by age 14' needs a source, a year, and a scope. If you can't find one, rewrite it as 'many coaches report' only if you have a named coach. Otherwise delete.
3. Model: change 'proves' to 'suggests', 'everyone' to 'many students I interviewed', 'always' to 'in most of the cases I found'. Accuracy builds ethos.
4. Coaching note: a mismatch is usually one source cited by different shortened names. Pick one label style and use it everywhere. Judges can't click links, so name the source in words too.
5. Model: 'The district cut art funding, therefore dropout rates rose' becomes 'Students in cut-funded schools lost an elective many said kept them engaged; dropout data suggest a link, though other factors changed that year.'
6. Coaching note: state the objection fairly, grant the true part, then show where it fails. A rebuttal that begins by agreeing is more persuasive than one that begins by dismissing.
7. Coaching note: the usual forgotten detail is the date of publication or the author's name for MLA and APA. There is no required style here, so consistency matters more than which one.
8. Coaching note: stumbles usually mark a sentence with two ideas. Split it, or move the second idea to the next sentence.
9. Model checklist: 500 to 3,000 words; no name or school; one category; sources in the Citations box with links if available; any AI use disclosed; pasted as text; deadline for my region confirmed.

04.5 Bonus Lab: Annotated Draft Clinic for the Critical Essay

WORKSHOP · BONUS LAB: ANNOTATED DRAFT CLINIC FOR THE CRITICAL ESSAY

1. A good rewrite keeps the structure (who, stop, instead) but changes the reasons you lead with. For a student council, lead with fairness and workload; for parents, with visibility and trust. The lesson is that thesis and audience travel together.
2. Strong openings put one specific image first, such as a number, an object, or a time of night, then use a short sentence to flip it into a problem. If your turn sentence is vague, name what exactly went wrong.
3. A model: Some will say the shortcut saves time, and it does. But saving time is exactly why nobody checks it. Notice the sentence agrees before it disagrees, which makes the turn credible.
4. Repeating a term builds the argument's vocabulary. Check that the term means the same thing each time, and that you vary the sentence around it so repetition feels purposeful and not lazy.
5. Most drafts discover that evidence is plentiful and explanation is thin. A fix is to add a sentence beginning This matters because, then replace that phrase with something more precise on the next pass.

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6. The returning version usually wins because it gives the reader a feeling of completion. A summary is acceptable only if it adds a consequence or a limit the body did not state.
7. Limits can be of place (one school), group (one grade), time (this decade), or action (a pilot, not a ban). The best limit is the one that lets you cite evidence you can actually gather.
8. Repeated openings (The, This, There is) flatten rhythm. Start some sentences with a clause, an object, or a time, and keep a few short ones for emphasis. Read aloud to hear the difference.
9. If the listener's version is vaguer than yours, your thesis is hiding. If it is wrong, an earlier paragraph is steering them. Revise the sentence they misread first, and then test again with a different reader.

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