

**Critical Analysis Unit – Lessons on the Visual Arts**  
**Developed for use within schools in the Toronto District School Board**

Introduction:

The following lessons may be applied to the secondary levels of a public institution. They are informed by the curriculum for the Arts of the Ontario Ministry of Education. The curriculum highlights three strands of importance within the Arts at the secondary level – theory, creation, and analysis – with these lessons emphasising Analysis. Analysis can be used to strengthen skills in reading, listening, and writing through the practice of critical thinking; however, critical thinking may be too abstract a concept to teach unless it is contextualised. The Arts, therefore, may act as a context through which critical thinking may be introduced to students. This unit presents lessons that introduce students to critical writing about ideas, images, and objects. It is one that can be applied to any medium in the Arts be it music, dance, drama, film, or the visual arts and begins at the sentential level. Teachers may follow these lessons sequentially or arbitrarily in order to best introduce or supplement critical thinking and writing skills. Lessons include introductory information and one exercise/activity. Teachers are encouraged to supplement or alter these as needed.

Lesson 1 – Crafting Clear Sentences:

What is a Sentence?

- A sentence is a group of words that must contain two parts:
  1. Subject
  2. Verb
- A sentence must express a comprehensible idea or thought.
- A sentence is not a matter of length.
- Two words can be a complete sentence.
- A dozen words might not be a complete sentence.

What is a Fragment?

- A fragment is a group of words in which either the subject or verb is missing. As a result, the group of words is incomprehensible
- Fragment: went to class.
- Sentence: Lisa installs her exhibit
- Fragment: Lisa her exhibit.
- Sentence: Before using the digital camera, take the cap off.
- Fragment: Before using the digital camera

What are run-on sentences?

- Sometimes a writer expresses two complete thoughts as one sentence. When the writer does not separate the two complete thoughts with punctuation, the result is a run-on sentence. Run-on sentences are confusing because the reader does not know where one complete thought ends and the second complete thought begins.
- Run- on: Asheka is painting a portrait of a young student is a challenging act.
- Edited: Asheka is painting a portrait of a young student. Painting a portrait is a challenging job.
- A run on sentence also occurs when a writer incorrectly uses a comma to join two complete thoughts. When two complete thoughts are joined with one comma and no connecting word (ie: ‘and’, ‘but’, ‘or’), a comma splice occurs.
- Run-on: Mrs. Vassel is an artist, she studied at OCAD.
- Edited: Mrs. Vassel is an artist. She studied at OCAD.

- A run-on sentence can be corrected by:
  1. adding a comma and then a connecting word (ie: *and, but, or, nor, yet*) after the first group of a comprehensible thought or idea of a run-on sentence.
    - Run on: Diane does the cooking Karen washes the dishes.
    - Edited: Diane does the cooking, and Karen washes the dishes.
    - Run on: Michelle likes swimming she prefers tennis.
    - Edited: Michelle likes swimming, but she prefers tennis.
  2. by using a semicolon after the first comprehensible thought if the two comprehensible thoughts are closely related.
    - Run on: Dark colour can make a room appear smaller light colour can make a room appear larger.
    - Edited: Dark colour can make a room appear smaller; light colour can make a room appear larger.
  3. by using a semicolon with a special kind of connecting word.
    - Run-on: Sun Tan lotion helps a person tan gradually sunscreen blocks the sun's rays and prevents sunburn.
    - Edited: Suntan lotion helps a person tan gradually; however, sunscreen blocks the sun's rays and prevents sunburn.
- Provided below is a list of other connecting words that are often used with semicolons in front of them and a comma after them.
- Words that add on a related sentence: *furthermore, also, moreover, besides, in addition, for instance, for example, in fact, like.*
- Run-on: I don't like big cars, **besides**, they cost too much.
- Edited: I don't like big cars; **besides** they cost too much.
- Connecting words that add an opposing or opposite side: *however, on the contrary, nevertheless, on the other hand.*
- Run-on: Lyn enjoys her new job however she wants to go back to school.
- Edited: Lyn enjoys her new job; however, she wants to go back to school.

### Summary:

- A sentence must express a comprehensible idea or thought.
- In order to correct a fragment and express a comprehensible thought, a group of words needs a subject **and** a verb.
- A run-on sentence may be corrected by:
  - a. using punctuation correctly.
  - b. using the appropriate connecting word.

Exercise: Each of the following sentences has an error. Identify the error according to the information above and correctly re-write each sentence (note: there may be more than one way to correct a sentence).

1. Henry his digital camera to Sam.

Error: \_\_\_\_\_

Edited: \_\_\_\_\_

2. Sam lent his acrylic paints to Sue gave them to her classmate Ji Heun, Sam didn't appreciate this.

Error: \_\_\_\_\_

Edited: \_\_\_\_\_

3. Movies are some of my favourite forms of self-expression, they can evoke such powerful emotions.

Error: \_\_\_\_\_

Edited: \_\_\_\_\_

4. But he always dances well.

Error: \_\_\_\_\_

Edited: \_\_\_\_\_

5. Sasha stretched the canvas over the frame the canvas was too small.

Error: \_\_\_\_\_

Edited: \_\_\_\_\_

6. The films of Robert Altman defy the conventions of film making. They can be described as being irreverent, witty, political, satirical, and entertaining, the subject matter they focus on ranges from fashion, to politics to the class system.

Error: \_\_\_\_\_

Edited: \_\_\_\_\_

7. I don't want to spend the money on a new film-editing software package, but, it would be nice to receive one for my birthday.

Error: \_\_\_\_\_

Edited: \_\_\_\_\_

8. The publisher sent Marilyn's manuscript back to her with some useful advice. However, Marilyn didn't have enough time to read all of them.

Error: \_\_\_\_\_

Edited: \_\_\_\_\_

9. Writing can be wonderfully liberating: it can also be demoralising.

Error: \_\_\_\_\_

Edited: \_\_\_\_\_

10. Can you buy me a few supplies at the art store which I will need for my sculpture and I will need to send to my brother for his birthday?

Error: \_\_\_\_\_

Edited: \_\_\_\_\_

### Lesson 2 – Analytical Writing:

Analytical writing combines description with inference or evaluation. Description involves describing what we see with our eyes whereas inference or evaluation involves interpreting reality based on evidence and combining that with our own (subjective) perspective. Generally, analysis consists of the following formula:

DESCRIPTION (desc.) + INFERENCE/EVALUATION (inf./eval.) = ANALYSIS

When we combine description with inference/evaluation, we analyze something from the context of our own life experience – how that object makes us feel or whether we can relate to it on an intellectual, emotional, or spiritual level. Consider the following examples:

1. Tom is wearing a wet, black raincoat and carrying a wet umbrella. (this is a descriptive statement of what we see).
2. Tom is wearing a wet, black raincoat and carrying a wet umbrella; it must be raining heavily. (this is an analytical statement combining a description of what is seen as well as an inference).

Seen in another way, we can say that a description focuses on the effect (the surface value of an object or image: in sentence #1, it is Tom wearing a wet, black raincoat and carrying an umbrella). In analytical writing, however, there is an attempt to connect the effect with its cause. In sentence #2, the cause is shown to be the rain, which causes Tom and his umbrella to be wet. This cause may be inferred (a subjective interpretation or judgment) based on the evidence (in sentence #2, this includes the wet raincoat and wet umbrella).

Exercise 1: Provide students with the list of objects and writings for which they must write an analytical sentence.

Teachers are encouraged to also provide their own lists as needed:

- A poem
- A photograph
- A short story
- A film
- A painting
- A sculpture

1. Assess or evaluate the analytical sentences collectively as a whole class (if students number less than ten) or in small groups.
2. Encourage students to critique each other's writings with respect, sensitivity, and in light of the above criteria, not personal taste.
3. Use the above criteria as starting points for discussion.

4. Encourage students to gradually look below the surface image of these objects/ideas and on to hidden meaning from which they can make inferences.

Sample Analytical Paragraph:

The following paragraph is an example of an analytical paragraph. It presents an argument and tries to convince the reader of how this argument is valid by providing supporting evidence. The argument means the same as inference, cause, and reason. The evidence is the description, which means the same as the effect, result or outcome.

Exercise 2: Provide students with a copy of the paragraph below. Teachers may also provide their own as needed. Encourage students to identify the meaning of new vocabulary contextually rather than using a dictionary. Emphasise the distinction between the description and the inference, which together make up an analysis.

1. Please read the paragraph and see if you can identify the argument (inference/cause) and its supporting evidence (effect/result/outcome).

In Sylvan Barnet’s “A Short Guide to Writing About Art”, John F.A.Taylor believes that the focus of the interior of the cathedral is very limited. It is concentrated primarily on the altar table. For instance, the first thing that the viewer notices is the glowing light coming from the lancets in the apse where the altar table stands. The consistent pattern and placement of the arches of the nave moves toward it; the mouldings come together with precision on it. Overhead, the highest point of the apse extends out from it; the rib shafts which carry it all the way to the floor of the nave force the eye to look at it. The altar is the only part of the Gothic cathedral, which is highly defined. In other places there is always an indefinable area, which is left unknown. Here, in the cathedral, there isn’t. The altar table is ultimately the point at which all of the cathedral’s design elements and focus end (103).

New vocabulary: cathedral, lancet, apse, nave, mouldings, ribshaft, Gothic

- a. The argument (inference) presented in this paragraph is about:

\_\_\_\_\_.

- b. List some of the evidence (description) presented in this paragraph:

\_\_\_\_\_.

Write your own analytical paragraph by choosing one of the following objects or ideas:

1. a painting
2. a photograph
3. a piece of industrial design
4. a piece of fashion design
5. nature

Lesson 3 – Critical Thinking:

The following is a list of questions that introduces the practice of critical thinking. Students may consider these questions when they must write a critical review or summary of an article, a film, a book, or an art piece.

1. What is the artist's basic position?
  - Is the artist inclined to hold a view regardless of evidence opposing that view? In other words, is the artist's stance somewhat prejudiced?
  - Does the artist admit any prejudices or limitations in the work, or are they left unexamined? Often the artist will address their own limitations, only to dismiss them as unimportant. Are they?
  - Is the artist's viewpoint consistent? If it isn't, has she acknowledged this inconsistency in her work?
2. How does the artist deal with opposing viewpoints?
  - Does the artist even mention opposing views (this could be a weakness in itself). If so, what views does the artist oppose? How?
  - Are these opposing views granted any validity? Does the artist report these views accurately and fairly? Does she explain why these views are inadequate or weak. Does she explain why one viewpoint is more appropriate than another?
3. How does the artist appeal to her audience? How does she use reason?
  - Does the artist rely on logic, or emotion or is it an ethical appeal? Is this form of appeal appropriate, given the subject matter? Does it work? For example, if a artist wants to appear knowledgeable, trustworthy, kind, generous, etc, she will usually present herself as that kind of person. This is an ethical appeal. If her motive is primarily to move her audience, she will appeal to them emotionally, by evoking fear, compassion, love, sorrow, etc. If she is trying to appeal to the audience's sense of reason or logic, she will use statistics, other documented sources, and authority to back her up.
  - Is the argument cohesive and coherent?
  - Are the connections logical and clear?
  - Is the logic derived from verifiable evidence? Are they academic or scholarly sources? Is this important?
4. What sources does the artist use?
  - Are the sources outdated or irrelevant?
  - Are they presented accurately?
  - Is the argument based on accurate information?
5. Does the structure or style (of the film, book, article, or painting) reflect the content?
  - Whether you're reviewing a book or an article, you might consider whether it is structurally coherent and organized. Are the chapters or subsections in the appropriate order. If there is a visual component, are the images easily accessible? Are they appropriate images? Do the images enhance the text?
  - Does the artist use an appropriate voice? Is it ironic, solemn, academic, tongue-in-cheek?
6. How does the artist conclude the argument?
  - If the argument being made is a valid one, has the artist taken into account its future implications?
  - If the research or ideas being explored are inconclusive, has the artist taken this into account?
  - What still remains to be explained? How could further research enhance the study?
  - Has the artist presented any explanations or solutions? Are they appropriate?

(adapted from "Developing a Critical Stance" from <http://www.eciad.ca/wc/critical.htm>)

Exercise: Provide students with the list of objects and writings for which they must write a critical summary. This may be as short as one paragraph or as long as a two-page essay. Teachers are encouraged to also provide their own lists as needed:

- A poem
  - A photograph
  - A short story
  - A film
  - A painting
  - A sculpture
1. Assess or evaluate the critical writing collectively as a whole class (if students number less than ten) or in small groups.
  2. Encourage students to critique each other's writings with respect, sensitivity, and in light of the above criteria, not personal taste.
  3. Use the above criteria as starting points for discussion.
  4. Encourage students to gradually look below the surface image of these objects/ideas and on to hidden meaning and emotions or memories that these objects evoke.

#### Lesson 4 – Applying Critical Thinking, Writing, and Analysis to the Medium of Film:

By providing students with a background on critical thinking, writing, and analysis, it is now possible to apply these skills to the films students will view. Prior to viewing, teachers are advised to review synopses of films in order to identify common themes or subject matter. These will provide the context on which a teacher may choose to focus. Here are sample activities a teacher may engage students in. These may be used as either pre- or post-screening activities. This lesson was specifically created for students participating in the Youth Programme series of the Toronto Reel Asian International Film Festival:

#### Themes for Discussion:

Common themes all films in the Youth Programme share include:

1. Parent-child dynamics
2. Identity
3. Notions of belonging
4. Perception
5. Overcoming obstacles
6. Biography

Exercise 1: As a pre- or post-screening activity, teachers may use comparison/contrast of personal/individual experiences to initiate discussion. Teachers may provide students with the list of questions below to reflect on or create their own relative to themes or topics currently being studied in class. Teachers may then engage students in a class discussion on some of these questions.

1. How does your life experience within the context of the aforementioned themes compare? How do they contrast?
2. Do these similarities and differences cross cultural/linguistic lines? If so, what makes these similarities universal? If not, what makes them unique to one's culture?
3. What are some common techniques that film uses to evoke the aforementioned themes?
4. Do you believe film is a medium that can successfully provoke thought or affect point-of-view? If so, how does it do this? Refer to one specific film that you saw today that achieved this. Refer to another film that wasn't as successful at achieving this.

Exercise 2: As a critical writing activity, teachers may then ask students to choose a short film to do a critical summary of using the processes outlined in the previous lessons. Teachers are encouraged to introduce such activities gradually. For instance, instead of initially assigning students to write a full essay, begin with having students write analytical sentences and building on these. After each writing activity:

- Assess or evaluate the critical writing collectively as a whole class (if students number less than ten) or in small groups.
- Encourage students to critique each other's writings with respect, sensitivity, and in light of the above criteria, not personal taste.
- Use the above criteria as starting points for discussion.
- Encourage students to gradually look below the surface image of these films' stories and on to hidden meaning and emotions or memories that these evoke.