



General Advice and Key Characteristics

Writing in Theatre & Dance

Writing focused on works of art seeks to examine and construct meaning by finding potential answers to intriguing questions. While writers in the sciences seek to inform other members of the scientific community of their findings to arrive at consensus, writers in the performing arts explore possible answers to important questions based on the interpretation of live performances and performance texts (play scripts, designs, choreography, libretti, etc.). Through witnessing performances and/or reading texts closely, writers in theatre and dance contribute to ongoing conversations about the significance of those texts and performances.

Writing in theater and dance is incredibly varied. The sub-discipline from which you write determines the expectations, characteristics, and goals of the writing project. In all its variety, however, writing in theatre and dance requires attention to detail, a critical eye, and most important, the ability to analyze and explain *why* you like a particular artist's - be it a playwright, choreographer, director, dancer, actor, or designer - choice(s).

Example:

Theatre history might ask you to develop a production concept for an ancient text.

Lighting design might ask you to review the lighting design in a local production.

Dance in Education might ask you to compose a research paper about arts and dance education in the U.S. today.

Acting might ask you to develop a strong thesis that draws conclusions about an actor's performance in a UM production.

Dramatic literature might ask you to analyze the structure or style of a play script.

Costume design might ask you to summarize the plot of a play script.

Architectural history might ask you to describe the historical inspirations and 'program' of a certain room in a campus building.

Close Reading and Witnessing

For most assignments that ask you to write about or analyze a *performance text*, you will need to...

- read, watch, listen, and examine the performance text more than once
- focus on some important aspect of the performance text (i.e. major themes, movement, color, line, pattern, sound, relationships).
- discover notable details that may hold significance (i.e. is the text broken into acts and scenes or some other notable or unusual structure?).
- develop questions about the significance of those details – ask *how* and *why* the performance text does or suggests something.
- refine and focus your questions until you have a single critical question.

- develop a thesis that answers your question and teaches readers something they may not otherwise have noticed about the performance text.
- identify (highlight and underline) textual evidence in support of your thesis.

For most assignments that ask you to write about or review a *production*, you will need to:

- watch/witness the production - be it dance, opera, or theatre - at least once, but more than once is ideal. Your evaluation should be written (or at least roughed out) within 24 hours of witnessing the production.
- take notes during the production focusing on some important aspect(s) - these important aspects will usually be specified by the assignment (i.e. performance(s), choreography, a design aspect, or directorial concept), but if they are not, you will not be able to write about everything, so focus on the details that stand out.
- develop a few questions about the significance of those details – ask how and why the production does or suggests something about its subject-matter (i.e. “Why did the director choose an all-male cast for *Twelfth Night*?” or “Why did the lighting designer choose to isolate the dancers in small pools of amber light?”).
- develop answers to your question(s) and argue whether or not the artist’s choices were clear or unclear, effective or ineffective, and share with the reader *why* you feel the way(s) you do.
- make a clear distinction between textual actions and choices made by the performer.
- identify evidence in support of your arguments (i.e. the production’s program notes, the performance text, other published reviews, interviews with artists involved in the production, etc.).

Common Expectations and Key Characteristics

Summary, Description, and Analysis

Some professors will ask you to write a **summary** of a play script in order to show you’ve read the play and to prepare you to contribute to class discussions. Summaries are usually only about a page long (if the assignment doesn’t specify, ask your instructor) and focus on the *plot* of the story. In your summary, try to describe the events that affect the action and relationships between the characters the most. You can focus on some of the major characters, what their main desires seem to be, and how those desires affect their relationships and the unfolding of the plot (i.e. “The play begins when Viola disguises herself as a man so she can become a servant to Duke Orsino.”).

Sometimes assignments will ask you to **describe** a performance. When describing a performance, focus on a few key aspects that stand out to you about the performer’s (actor, dancer, singer) work. Describe what you notice about their vocal, physical, and character choices?

In many assignments, you’ll see the verb “analyze.” When you’re asked to **analyze** a performance text or a production, your instructor is asking you to methodically examine the contents, structure, and/or meaning of the text or performance in detail, for the purpose of *explaining* and *interpreting* the work from your perspective.

Example:

If you “liked” *Twelfth Night* when you read it, ask yourself:

- “Why did I like the play?”
- If you answer, “because it was funny,” ask yourself...
- “What was funny about the play?”
- If you answer something like, “I laughed at how Malvolio was treated so badly by Sir Toby and Maria,” ask yourself...
- “Why is the scene when Malvolio is scapegoated so funny?”
- From here you can *explain and interpret* the scene by writing about the timing of the dialogue, the relationships between the characters, the characters’ desires, the placement of the scene within the structure of the play’s plot, and Shakespeare’s intentions when he wrote the scene.

Analysis is the expression of your conclusion about *why* a work of art has the effects it has on you as a reader/spectator.

Developing a Thesis

A strong paper in the more traditionally ‘academic’ Theatre & Dance courses (Theatre History, World Dance, Dance History, Dramatic Literature) will *argue* for a perspective/thesis that takes readers beyond the surface of the performance text or historical subject to unfold a not-so-obvious understanding. Your thesis should be an *analytical* assertion, not a descriptive summary, and it should require some work on your part to demonstrate its validity. This means you must read to discover not only what a text says but also to discover what it does and suggests about its themes, ideas, or historical context.

In your close reading of a text, you may begin to recognize significance, for example, in the language used, in rituals performed, in patterns, in repeated images or themes, in a metaphor, or in what is included and omitted. As you note these details, ask questions about their significance, eventually refining your questions to focus on a single critical question that you would like to answer in your paper. Sometimes, the assignment itself gives you your question (and it’s very important that you give an answer!). Here are some sample prompts from a Theatre History I assignment. These all require that you formulate and support an argumentative thesis

- What do we learn from theatre history? This essay should make direct reference to a play text on the syllabus and its production.
- Write a research paper on the technical innovations of Greek or Noh theatre.
- Choose *Dulcitius*, *Oedipus*, *Everyman*, or *Atsumori* and consider what insights it gives us into the society of its day, and the theatre of its day.
- What is the relationship between ritual and theatre?

Developing a Concept

Some writing assignments in theater and dance may ask you to develop a production, performance, or design concept for a hypothetical production. Here are some more sample prompts from a Dramatic Literature assignment:

- As a director, propose a production of one of the texts we have or will study in the course. This proposal should make direct reference to the play text and to other productions of your chosen text.

- As an actor, describe your process in preparation for performing a role in one of the texts we have or will study in the course. This proposal should make direct reference to the play text and to other performances of your chosen role.
- As a costume/lighting/set designer/audio designer, propose a design for a production of one of the texts we have or will study in the course. This proposal should make direct reference to the play text and to other designs for productions of your chosen text.

For assignments like these, your essay still needs to be *argumentative*. It should still have a clear thesis statement at the end of your introduction in which you state your intent as a performance practitioner.

For example: “As an actor playing the role of Catherine Givings in Sarah Ruhl’s *In the Next Room*, I would pursue the super-objective of convincing Dr. Givings to love me, thereby highlighting the play’s themes of love and release.”

Remember that you must not only describe your concepts/ideas/approaches (physical and vocal choices, energy, rhythm, use of objects, gesture, etc.) in detail but also *analyze and argue why* it is important that you make those choices as an actor.

Supporting Your Concept/Thesis: Textual Evidence, Secondary Sources, and Visual Material

Strong analytical arguments grow out of relevant and convincing *textual evidence*. The notable textual details that help you to develop a critical question and discover an answer to your question may eventually become the textual support you will present in your argument. Use quotations from the performance text - be it a play script, libretto, or other textual rendering of a performance - directly, in the body of your essay to help you demonstrate particular conclusions you’ve drawn about the work. Even if you’re writing a review of a production based on a text of some kind, the performance text is your primary source, so use it.

Strong analytical arguments also grow out of relevant *secondary sources*. These include but are not limited to:

- production reviews of the play or opera you’re writing about - try *The New York Times* Theatre section, *The Guardian* Stage section, the *TimeOut New York* Theatre section among many others.
- peer-reviewed journal articles - try JSTOR or ProjectMUSE in the Mansfield Library’s internet database.
- books about the play or playwright, choreographer, director, composer, librettist, etc. - try the 4th floor 792 section for books, or 2nd floor 800s for play scripts in the Mansfield Library’s catalogue.
- For help finding good secondary sources, schedule an appointment with the School of Theatre & Dance librarian Professor Tammy Ravas: tammy.ravas@umontana.edu

Finally, when making an argument about a performance text or production, it is important to illustrate your ideas with visual materials, including production photographs, images of promotional materials like posters or playbills, design renderings or inspirational artworks or imagery, etc. Paste the images in the body of your essay, include an attribution caption, and a figure number (i.e. “fig. 1”) so that you can refer to it in your paper (i.e. “see fig. 1”).

The Final Draft Checklist

- My paper adequately answers the question(s) in the assignment prompt(s).
 - My paper has a *thesis statement* (if applicable).
 - Each of my paragraphs clearly states the main argument/point/idea in the first sentence.
 - My paper makes effective use of secondary sources, the performance text, and images to illustrate my thesis.
 - My paper clearly *analyses and explains* my use of the sources to justify/illustrate my creative choices/ideas.
 - My paper is within the word/page count specified in the assignment.
 - My paper has a unique title.
 - My paper is formatted properly and is mostly free of grammatical errors.
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