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Discerning Between Options: The Evaluation Essay

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The purpose of this article is to explain how to write an evaluation essay that is clear, informative, and persuasive. Using pre-established criteria, you can become an effective critic of practically any subject.

Everyone's a Critic

It's true: everyone has an opinion about something, from politics to movies to ice cream. Arguing about what is better and why can sometimes be the most rewarding aspect of writing. These positions can be expressed in an evaluation essay, the aim of which is to assess the quality of a book, article, event, or other subject of significance. Regardless of the topic, an evaluation essay makes a clear, debatable judgment about the value of that subject. That judgment can be positive or negative but must be based on objective criteria that you and your readers agree upon.

Good or Bad, Better or Best

Many areas of interest require us to make judgment calls: Oscar-worthy films, political candidates, the best steakhouse in Riverside. Whatever the subject, you must learn as much about it as possible, and then decide what criteria on which you will base your evaluation. This process will require research and a firm understanding of how to measure the subject against other examples in the same genre. What makes a great film, and how do we know? What elements do all great films possess? Your criteria should not be based on preference (what you like or dislike) but on objective, relevant characteristics that will help you assess the value of your subject. Limit those criteria to just a handful so you and your reader can examine each in depth.

After you have selected your criteria, you can form your judgment in your thesis statement. While your judgment is your opinion and, therefore, somewhat subjective, it can become more objective and unbiased if guided by your chosen criteria. Consider if your subject fulfills your criteria and *how* it fulfills your criteria. Remember that evaluations are not often a matter of *good or bad* but of *better and best*. Making a judgment call is difficult in between these fine lines of distinction.

Before stating your evaluation, offer a brief description or summary of your subject. The summary gives the reader enough background to understand the topic and the stakes involved. Most of your essay should then discuss how your subject meets your criteria. Demonstrating a thorough understanding of your subject by incorporating quality, academic sources, and specific examples will increase the credibility of your evaluation. Ultimately, your aim should be to persuade readers to accept your judgment over others and then act accordingly by, for instance, choosing one film for Best Picture, voting for a particular candidate, or patronizing a local restaurant.

Examples

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Imagine you need to evaluate a book for a college course. Several options for relevant criteria for this subject include character development, plot, and use of language. If you wanted to make a positive judgment about the book based on these criteria, your thesis might read:

J. R. R. Tolkien's The Lord of the Rings is an exceptional work of fiction because it includes a powerfully redemptive plot, dynamic characters, and a mixture of fascinating languages.

For a different course, you may need to evaluate an article. Or maybe you need to evaluate an article for a different course. Relevant criteria in this example may include clarity, organization, and use of sources. If you wanted to make a negative judgment about the article based on these criteria, your thesis might read:

Jean Keiser's article "Racism and Ethnic Dysphoria in The Lonely Londoners" is ineffective because her argument is vague, her organization is chaotic, and she fails to incorporate credible sources.

Tips

1. When deciding on what criteria to use for your evaluation, make a list of characteristics that define your subject. What makes your subject good/bad, effective/ineffective, useful/useless?
2. If you are concerned that your judgment is unclear, consider these questions: *Is my judgment based on objective characteristics or personal biases? How does my judgment demonstrate the value of my subject?*
3. If you are struggling to explain how your subject fulfills your criteria, locate key examples from the subject where you see your criteria displayed and build your discussion on those examples.

Works Consulted

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