

UWS AND COMP ESSAYS: THE LENS ESSAY

Lens argumentation depends on close reading...

While lens essays consist of more than close reading, they can't function without it! In fact, in lens analysis you will perform two different, but related, forms of close reading:

1. Primary text – Observing tone, diction, characters, plot, style, structure, themes, etc.
2. Lens text – Identifying key terms, argument's structure, how it uses evidence, etc.

In the lens essay, you will draw connections between your observations about textual details and a larger claim about the text as a whole (like you did with your close reading paper), but the lens will restrict your vision to ideas relevant to the lens.

... and it is also a precursor to research writing.

Lens argumentation helps you build skills necessary to research writing, including:

- Engaging critically with a school of thought or critical theory
- Constructing a conversation between two or more different texts

How to read your (presumably abstract/theoretical) lens text

- Read using a pen, pencil, or highlighter to mark up the text.
- Annotate: write down questions and comments; note key terms and important passages.
- Use a dictionary for unfamiliar words!
- Read slowly and carefully, sentence by sentence, and re-read as often as necessary.
- Identify the topic of each paragraph and how the paragraphs relate to one another. Consider drawing up a “reverse outline” – your own outline of the written text.
- Distinguish between the voice of the lens author and the voice of the evidence the lens text analyzes.
- Don't sweat it if you don't understand every single nuance!

Types of lens theses

- Lens reveals something in the primary text that you would not recognize without the lens.
- Primary text reveals something in the lens that you would not recognize without the primary text.
- Lens text builds on the ideas of the primary text.
- Primary text builds on the ideas of the lens.
- Primary text is an example of the lens's ideas in a specific, different, or unexpected way that clarifies the theory of the lens
- Lens text is revelatory but cannot account for everything in the primary text.
- Primary text is revelatory but cannot account for everything in the lens.
- Primary text changes, advances, extends, redirects (etc.) the theory of the lens.
- Lens text theorizes the scenario of the primary text, which requires understanding.
- Lens text misunderstands a specific element of the primary text
- Primary text misunderstands a specific element of the lens text
- Etc.

Dos and do-nots

Do:

- Locate inconsistencies in the text
- Look for value and agreements
- Put the two texts into conversation
- Pay a lot of attention to both texts
- Understand and summarize the heart of the lens text
- Attend to what interests you
- Develop a reading that would not be possible without putting the lens texts together

Do not:

- Dismiss the lens text altogether
- Fall in love with the lens text
- Compare and contrast
- Focus on just one text
- Treat a peripheral part of the lens like it is the central idea
- Forget that you are writing from the perspective of the lens or forget to address the text through quoting
- Develop a reading that would be determined by just one text alone
- Feel the need to account for the entire lens text

Example: Introduction paragraph from a successful student lens essay

For the United States, and especially in New York, the middle of the 19th century meant an increase in immigration, which led to a more diverse society and a huge rise in the population of cities. Consequently, a belief that prostitution was growing became widespread throughout society. Though prostitution was not officially illegal and most public officials tolerated the practice, many were still very opposed to the idea and thought prostitution was a shameful line of work. Moreover, prostitutes, especially those who were less affluent, could still get into trouble for disorderly conduct. In 1836, Helen Jewett, a somewhat “high-class” prostitute who worked in a brothel owned by Rosina Townsend, was found dead in her room. A frequent visitor to the brothel, Richard P. Robinson, alias Frank Rivers, was suspected of the murder and put on trial. From the beginning, the Jewett murder trial was well publicized and quickly became a contested issue throughout the area. However, when communications theorist Robert Hariman’s theories of “social knowledge” and “performance” are applied to the Jewett case, it becomes clear that the trial was not really about reaching a verdict, but rather about dramatizing, emotionalizing and over sexualizing the women of the brothel in a performance that addressed various societal assumptions about prostitutes and the female gender in general. The discrepancy between how female characters were portrayed throughout the Robinson trial reveals the inconsistencies in how women were perceived and treated within mid-nineteenth century society, a social tension that stemmed from multiple, competing ideas of gender.

Credit: The Brandeis University Writing Center, 2020.

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