

Critical Inquiry [Sample Syllabus]

Maryland Institute College of Art LA 101.22, Tuesday 9:00-11:45, Bunting 433

"No one, not even another reader, could know what those signs created once they traveled up the eye-beam and into the recesses of the self."

—Sven Birkerts, *The Gutenberg Elegies*

Instructor information

Instructor Amy Eisner (aeisner@mica.edu)

Office hours No set hours; just let me know that you want to meet & we'll set a time.

Books to buy

Eggers, Dave, ed., *The Best American Nonrequired Reading 2008*. New York: Houghton Mifflin 2008. ISBN 9780618902835.

Hacker, Diana. *A Pocket Style Manual*. 4th ed. New York: Bedford/St. Martin's 2004.

Tyson, Lois. *Critical Theory Today: A User-Friendly Guide*. 2nd ed. New York: Routledge 2006. ISBN 0415974100.

Course objectives and structure

The chief goal of Critical Inquiry is to help students gain an understanding of the intellectual and philosophical content of their own work and the work of others. Critical Inquiry calls for a vigorous investigation into the nature and sources of personal values and the mechanisms by which these values are applied when the art maker creates and critiques. Critical Inquiry also asks students to assess the consequences (in their art and in their criticism) of the value choices they make and apply every day.

This course also seeks to give students the practical opportunity to sharpen and extend their ability to articulate their critical responses, both in written and spoken form. Thus, Critical Inquiry is designed to aid students as art makers and as art critics by demonstrating the essential link between critical thinking and art making and by showing the powerfully complementary nature of language as a medium of expression vital to the thoughtful artist.

Critical Inquiry asks students to engage in four critical activities:

1. Respond visually to various artifacts (texts, film, and art);
2. Examine critically via language (written and spoken) both the artifact and responses to the artifact;
3. Engage in critical dialogue and debate; and
4. Write critically in an extended, formal manner and in a shorter, more expressive mode.

Each session centers on an artifact, usually a text-based artifact such as a short story, poem, essay or film. **Each student writes one page each week** in response to the artifact that will be at the center of discussion that week. One page, double-spaced, is not much more than a paragraph. It is enough room to articulate one thought or thought process, to record *what happens* in that first encounter with the artifact. Pursuing and capturing these thoughts greatly enriches the individual and collective experience of the class. Together, each student's pages comprise a **critical response journal**.

In addition, the class is divided into four workgroups, and the members of each group play a distinct role in each session. The roles vary from week to week, and by the end of the term all students have engaged equally in each of these roles: producing a **visual response** to the artifact, leading a **critique** of the visual responses, producing and refining a **written response** to an artifact or encounter, and asking **questions** about the various modes of inquiry that we'll encounter in our theory textbook.

In all of these activities, students are encouraged to respond in a wholly authentic and personal manner and, at the same time, to work hard to understand what is bound up in these responses – what these individual responses imply about language, literature, art, society, and the world. In Critical Inquiry, students' critical and aesthetic views are both respected and examined, and for both reasons students will be asked tough questions about those views and the manner of their presentation. It is impossible not to have a critical response to an artifact, but it is possible to be unable or unwilling to understand, articulate, or honestly investigate that response. It is this unwillingness that Critical Inquiry seeks to overcome.

Toward the end of the course, students write a **personal critical profile** as their final paper. This is a more substantial essay (five to seven pages) that outlines values and intellectual habits, and the sources and consequences of these attributes as they are manifest in one's work and life as a young artist. At the start of the course, the final essay may sound like a daunting enterprise. However, the course work itself – the reading, the discussions, the visual responses, the essays, the one-pagers, and the critiques – are all designed to produce the concrete material out of which the final essay is fashioned. By the end of the semester, the research and digging will have been done, and the task will be to synthesize that raw material into a cogent essay. In that synthesis lies the potential for deep personal satisfaction at gaining important insights into one's artistic and intellectual nature, perhaps for the first time.

Workgroups

For each class session, in addition to the one-page response for the critical response journal, each workgroup has specific responsibilities:

The students in one workgroup each produce a **visual response** to the artifact, using whatever medium or process they think appropriate.

The students in a second workgroup lead a **critique** of the visual creations of the first workgroup. The critique is a pervasive activity in the training of an artist, a staple of the art school experience, and Critical Inquiry provides students with an opportunity not only to engage in the critique but also to examine the content and process, the assumptions and values, of the critique itself.

The members of a third workgroup each **raise a substantive question** about the theory reading—something that seemed particularly puzzling and important. Or, if you prefer, you may do one of the following:

- *Engage the class in a quick game or activity* that amplifies or explores a concept or question presented in the theory reading.
- *Create and share a cartoon, map, diagram, or chart* that visually represents, interprets, and/or responds to a concept presented in the theory reading.
- *Share an artifact* (news article, advertisement, BRIEF video) that crystallizes a concept from the theory reading for you.

Please note that the theory chapters for each week are NOT paired with the artifacts that would most obviously call out for those theoretical tools. That would be too formulaic. You are not being asked to mimic other people’s intellectual responses but rather to grapple with a variety of approaches and their implications as you discover your own.

The members of the fourth workgroup produce a thoughtful and well-written **three-page essay** refining their thoughts about an artifact or encounter. The purpose here is *not* to force-fit thoughts into an artificial structure (e.g., the five-paragraph essay). This is an opportunity to revisit prior responses and, with the benefit of additional time and discussion, to push the questions further, formulate a more precise argument, provide more exact evidence, consider alternatives, and generally improve the quality of the writing. In our section, we will also vary our focus as follows:

- Essay 1: relate *a meaningful disagreement you’ve had* about an artifact.
- Essay 2: reflect on *how others responded* to an artifact.
- Essay 3: explore an instance in which *you changed your mind* about an artifact.

For at least two of these essays, you must focus on an artifact encountered in this class.

Responsibilities

Your **participation** is essential to the success of this class. To encourage participation, assignments will only be accepted from students who productively attend that week’s class session or who have been excused from the session. This means that each unexcused absence costs approximately half a grade. Please communicate with me regarding any absence, preferably in advance. If you are requesting that the absence be excused, please say so. It is your responsibility to arrange to make up work missed due to an excused absence.

All written work must be well-written, typed, and proofread.

One-page responses are *due on Blackboard on Monday morning* so I can read them Monday afternoon and make the best use of our time in class on Tuesday morning. I strongly recommend posting theory questions and links in advance as well. Please save your work before you post it, and paste the text directly into the form—don’t attach the document.

Essays must be double-spaced, printed out, handed in at the beginning of class each Tuesday *and* posted on Blackboard before class.

All students are expected to use the **Writing Studio** or Academic Writing Workshop to work with a personal tutor on the writing for this course, such as the three-page essays. All students are expected to meet with me one-on-one at least twice during the course.

Grading of assignments

These guidelines are approximate. I also take into account factors such as individual effort and progress. The guidelines are intended to help to clarify expectations.

One-page responses (2 points)

2 = Clear, authentic, substantive response.

1 = Good thinking, but the writing is muddy, *or* clear enough, but superficial.

0 = Poorly written and lacks substance.

Theory questions (2 points)

2 = Helps the class to grasp key points and understand their significance.

1 = Interesting, but comprehension or planning could be better.

0 = Insubstantial effort.

Three-page essays (5 points)

5 = Clear, authentic, substantive essay; a meaningful revision.

3 = Good thinking and/or writing, but could be clearer or more thoughtful.

0 = Poorly written and lacks substance; not a meaningful revision of prior work.

Visual responses to artifacts (5 points)

5 = Highly compelling in itself and as a response to the artifact.

3 = Compelling in itself or in relation to the artifact, but not both.

0 = Not compelling in itself or in relation to the artifact.

In-class critiques / curator's discussion (5 points)

5 = Engages the class in observant and constructive conversation that raises insightful questions about the visuals, our responses to the visuals, and the artifact to which the visuals respond.

3 = Makes some observant and constructive points, but sticks with the safe and familiar rather than fully engaging with the work and its potential.

0 = Token participation.

Final essay (25 points)

25 = Clear, authentic, insightful essay that dives deeply into the artifacts and experiences of the course

15 = Good thinking and/or writing, but could be clearer, more thoughtful, and/or more closely tied to the semester's artifacts and experiences.

5 = Poorly written and lacks substance.