English 1B Spring 2016 **Critical Analysis Sample Outline**

**Overview:** This form offers the most basic outline you could use to be sure you covered all of the tasks this assignment requires. You will find that most professional writers about films will usually alternate between analysis, evaluation, and plot summary. Often there is more plot summary in the beginning and more analysis/evaluation toward the end, but otherwise there is no set pattern. Obviously, I won’t penalize anyone who wants to try a more sophisticated structure than this sample, as long as there is an overall sense of clarity and coherence. Each paragraph should have a clear focus and task. Also, since you aren’t writing in skinny columns, your paragraphs will likely be longer than the typical newspaper paragraph.

1. **Introduction to the Essay:** There should be some sort of hook to keep the reader going, something that establishes a reason for discussing *this* film with *this* audience at *this* time, particularly wit a film **analysis**, rather than a film **review**, which are almost always written new films. It usually relates to the ***Kairos***: what is going on in this society or the world at large that this film is commenting on. For example, the film analysis of *Avatar* dealt with its commentary on war over resources, as the filmmaker was upset about America’s current wars in the Middle East.

Also, offer at least a brief overview of ***your thesis***: your main interpretive point about the film that your analysis will make. The introduction also is likely to include at least a hint of the plot and what makes it timely. For example: here is the opening of a professional review of *Gattaca* by Roger Ebert:

“What is genetic engineering, after all, but preemptive plastic surgery? Make the child perfect in the test tube, and save money later. Throw in perfect health, a high IQ and a long life-span, and you have the brave new world of *Gattaca*, in which the bio-formed have inherited the earth, and babies who are born naturally get to be menial laborers. This is one of the smartest and most provocative of science fiction films, a thriller with ideas. Its hero is a man who challenges the system. Vincent ([Ethan Hawke](http://www.rogerebert.com/cast-and-crew/ethan-hawke)) was born in the old-fashioned way, and his genetic tests show he has bad eyesight, heart problems and a life expectancy of about 30 years. He is an ‘In-Valid,’ and works as a cleaner in a space center.”

1. **Set the film or story in its specific cultural and historical context**: Even if you introduce the essay this way, you will probably go into more detail elsewhere. Here you could work in some details about the plot as they relate to the themes you will discuss, but don’t tell the plot otherwise.

For example: with *Gattaca*, you would likely discuss the latest breakthroughs in “test-tube babies” and genetic engineering (Dolly the sheep, etc.) and the controversies those developments aroused. You could also relate this film’s treatment of the theme with other similar works. For example, you could discuss how this film relates to movies that explore institutionalized socioeconomic inequality as it relates to human cloning, such as *The Island* and *Never Let Me Go*.

1. **Analysis:**
   1. **Identify/discuss the film’s or story’s enduring human concerns** These are issues that go beyond the cultural moment of the film. For example: *Gattaca*, like *Hamlet,* deals with sibling rivalry and its impact on a person’s self-definition, and like many other classic works, it shows a hero struggling against society’s limiting definition of his status and potential for achievement. The ways discrimination lead to social injustice is another theme.
   2. **Interpret a theme and thesis in the work:** In this section you would pick one of the themes listed above and dig further into it. For example: If you like the theme of a hero who defies the limits that society puts on him based on his origins, you could explore that theme in *Gattaca,* offering your interpretation of what the film is saying about that and how it gets the message across (specific plot developments, lines of dialog, symbolism in the set design).
2. **Evaluation:** Explain what you see as the film’s key strengths and weaknesses. **Be specific about the criteria** you are using and don’t choose too many. Don’t feel this needs to be one paragraph, either! Use a **paragraph block** (series of smaller paragraphs that work together to make a section). For example: Strengths of *Gattaca* include interesting ideas and story, compelling characters, good acting, and really well thought-out set design. I can’t think of any weaknesses.
3. **Response:** You can also include your personal response to the film/book, most likely in the beginning or the end, but don’t take up too much space doing that.

**Conclusion:** Like the introduction, the concluding paragraph is a place to return to the “big picture” of the film’s context--what makes it timely to be discussing even if it isn’t a new film--as you try to restate your key claim about the film in an interesting and memorable way. It is NOT just a container for the topic sentences to be recycled in. This is a misuse of the standard 5-paragraph essay format that you were probably given in high school. That format is fine for high school, but it is too limiting for the kind of papers you will be asked to write in college. Look at the concluding paragraphs on the professional models to see what I mean.

**Overview of the sample below:** All you have to turn in is an outline of topic sentences, with a hint of how you might develop each paragraph with details from the film. The introduction doesn’t have to be a full paragraph, just a hint of what you will cover in it. The thesis should be as polished as you can make it, though. This sample is a bit lengthier than I need from you, though. It’s just easier for me to think in sentences than phrases.

**Sample Outline:** A New/Old Style of Discrimination Examined in *Gattaca*

**I. Introduction to the Essay:** Here I will introduce the film briefly by identifying its context when it came out, maybe with a quote from a reviewer back then. (Specific cultural and historical context)With our society still wrestling with the evils of discrimination, as evidenced in the Black Lives Matter movement and the strife over immigrants and refugees, even infants (“anchor babies”), it is sadly still a timely topic. In this film, discrimination against non-cloned people works as a metaphor for other kinds of discrimination, particularly the kind that is based on factors a baby has no control over, such as race, class, physical or mental disabilities, or national origin. [Here I’d give a few details from the film to show how discrimination against non-clones is used to reflect other kinds of discrimination in our society—especially on the job, in the dating world. This might go in the introduction or be the first paragraph of the body.]

**Thesis:** Through its ingenious plot and world-building, its excellent character-development and acting, and even its brilliant set design, *Gattaca* engages the audience in a vision that suggests our traditional American promise of equal opportunity for all who are willing to work hard is becoming more and more a fiction.

**II. Analysis/evaluation**

**Enduring human concerns** I’d be dealing with is everyone’s desire to live in a just society where every child gets what it needs to develop to its full potential, and everyone gets a fair chance to succeed. *Gattaca* shows that it is not only unjust but foolish at the society level to arbitrarily limit people, prejudging them as inferior before they’ve been given a chance to prove themselves.

**III. Evaluation:** Strengths of *Gattaca* include interesting ideas and story, compelling characters, good acting, and really well thought-out set design. I can’t think of any weaknesses.

a. **Great ideas**: Using a futuristic device like cloning to reflect our history of discrimination is a brilliant idea, well executed. I’d include supporting details that show the forward/backward looking, e.g. discrimination in job interviews and dating, “passing” for cloned as people once “passed” for white.

b. **Engaging characters/ great acting**: I’d discuss how the film demonstrates this by showing how **Victor**, though he is a non-clone (“God child”), is extremely well qualified for the work he does for the space program, even if he had to use fraud to get a seat at the table. I’d discuss plot points/scenes that show this and that engage us emotionally and show Ethan Hawke’s great dramatic acting. Ditto Jude Law & Uma Thurman.

C. **Set design**: I’d probably save this for the conclusion to leave some strong mental images in the reader’s mind, but I thought the spiral staircase was a great visual that supported the themes of the work.

**Conclusion:** Here I’d briefly give my personal response to the film to help readers see how this film can engage viewers’ emotions, make us feel personally invested in Victor’s getting away with his scheme. I’d also include some reviewers’ statements about how the film moved them. I’d also make a final statement about how the themes of this work relate to our current social concerns, maybe specifically to the recently approved Dream Act as a way to open college to a group that has faced a lot of discrimination in the past—college-aged people who were brought to America illegally when they were kids.