

How to write a literary analysis, using Chris Stuckman's "*Enemy Explained*" as an example
Richard Cunningham

WHAT FOLLOWS IS OFFERED AS A GUIDELINE. DO NOT WRITE A PAPER THAT LOOKS OR SOUNDS EXACTLY LIKE ANYTHING HERE.

1) Start with a general statement ABOUT THE WORK, not a general statement that goes beyond the work.

Good: "*Enemy* is one of the most confusing films I have ever seen."

Bad: There are a lot of confusing movies around.

Good: *Not Wanted on the Voyage* is a novel that retells the familiar tale of Noah's ark through the literary genre of magic realism.

Bad: Everyone knows the Biblical story of Noah's ark.

Good: One lesson we might take away from *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Nighttime* is that we should be careful what we wish for.

Bad: People should be careful what they wish for, and this is as true of people with autism as it is of anyone.

As quickly as possible, become as specific as possible.

"Upon first viewing I had a definite grasp on the central story, . . . [but] the added elements of spiders, keys, and surreal imagery had me boggled." "Surrealism" is an artistic form in which realistic elements are presented in a way more dream-like than realistic (*Broadview* 849).

The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time begins with a mystery—who killed Wellington—but uncharacteristically for a murder mystery, we discover the answer well before the end of the story.

2) Give your reader a sense of what is to follow.

I will help you understand *Enemy* by writing "in depth about its deep-rooted symbolism and metaphors." (A symbol is something that represents itself but also suggests other meanings. It is like a metaphor in that it extends meaning [*Broadview* 849].)

In this essay, I will explain why the solution to the murder of the dog Wellington is not the central concern of a story that initially seems to be a murder mystery with exactly that crime driving it forward. To do so, I will first describe Christopher, the narrator, and his

father, whose name we never learn; then I will follow the model provided by the book itself: I will answer the question of “who killed Wellington?” before I explain what the book’s actually trying to teach its readers.

- 3) Provide what is called a “literature review” (typically abbreviated as “lit. review”) in which you very briefly summarize what others have written about the text you will explain. In the *Enemy Explained* video the lit review is gestured at when the narrator says

“There [are] correct and incorrect interpretations of *Enemy*. I’ve read many attempts at analysing this film, and some have proved wildly inaccurate. No, spiders are not taking over the world, as some have stated. No, Jake Gyllenhal does not have an identical twin, as some have believed. They are in fact the same person. I’ll back up all of these comments with statements from the film-makers as well as my own . . . interpretation.”

Nb: “There [are] without a doubt correct and incorrect interpretations of . . .” Never ever say anything so obvious. It is wheel spinning and time wasting.

In a written lit. review the claims made by others have to be more rigorously supported. It is not enough to write “Others have said [this or that].” You must add to that the specific information of WHO said it, and WHERE. For example,

“Although Richard Cunningham maintains that the overhead wires shown repeatedly in the movie suggest the fragility of modern life, I am more convinced by Chris Stuckman’s idea that the overhead wires are reminiscent of, and therefore symbolize, spiders’ webs (Cunningham 24; Stuckman).”

(At this point it is worth calling attention to the tautological quality of Chris Stuckman’s assertion that he will “back up [his] comments with . . . [his] own . . . interpretation.” This is a tautology because Stuckman’s “comments” *are* his “interpretation,” or *vice versa*: his interpretation is his comments. Either way, it’s a logical fallacy to support what you plan to argue with the argument itself. It’s like saying “if you don’t believe me, just ask me; I’ll tell you.” So don’t make that mistake.)

Stuckman’s next move is to present a quotation from Denis Villeneuve, which is exactly what he just finished telling us he would do. ‘I will support my interpretation by citing, among others, the director of the movie. Now, here is what he has to say: . . .’ Analogously, you might write:

I will support my analysis by citing a written essay by Richard Cunningham, a video essay by Chris Stuckman, and by quoting directly from the movie itself. In “The Surreal Spiders of the GTA” Cunningham calls to our attention . . .

Notice that in Stuckman’s video he accesses (makes use of) two different video interviews with Villeneuve. In both, Villeneuve says the same thing, that the movie is about Gyllenhal’s subconscious. You can use more than one source from a single critic. And if that critic says the

same thing in two different publications it can have the effect of reinforcing the point you want to emphasize. (It might be worth noting that when Villeneuve says “the movie is about Gyllenhal’s sub-conscious” we should not mistake Gyllenhal the real-life actor with Gyllenhal the main character in the movie *Enemy*.)

- 4) After quoting Villeneuve, and summarizing those quotations (“it’s a battle raging in the main character’s sub-conscious”) Stuckman reminds us that one of the more befuddling issues in the movie has yet to be addressed: “And what the hell are those spiders all about?”
- 5) The video essay then immediately drops the spider issue again to offer us a detailed comparison of the “two” main characters: history teacher Jake (neurotic, messy, unkempt) and actor Jake (who wears expensive clothing and a wedding ring, and keeps his hair neat).
- 6) After this comparison, the essay follows the chronology that we encounter in the movie, by which I mean Stuckman starts discussing it from first to last, or, if it were a book, from front to back. Analysing from start to end is almost invariably the best strategy.

To summarize to this point,

- 1) we’ve been told why this video essay is relevant, why it exists –because *Enemy* is a very confusing movie–
- 2) what we will encounter in the essay,
- 3) we’ve been exposed to a lit review,
- 4) we’re reminded in a specific fashion of 1) and that reminder serves to build suspense, 5) a final piece of necessary information is provided (necessary for the smooth flow of the essay, this information also works to indirectly support the thesis that Gyllenhal is a single character waging a sub-conscious battle rather than two separate characters),
- 6) The explication of the text (in this case the movie *Enemy*) begins at the beginning of the text, and moves through it chronologically: i.e. from start to finish.

Voice-over from mother; “Chaos is order yet undeciphered”; shot of the pregnant woman; key; scenes inside “seedy sex club of some sort,” including the spider on the platter; then history-teacher Jake whose first words are “Control. It’s all about control”; dictatorships; history a pattern that repeats itself; the wires above Toronto appear as if a spider web; image of a Roman fascist salute; “defiance against rule, dictatorships, and fear of commitment are all themes that *Enemy* has woven through it”; “sometimes [these themes are made] clear through dialogue, sometimes through imagery”; the repetitiousness of his life is communicated in the next few scenes, scenes of seemingly memorized lectures, sex with his girlfriend, empty apartment; the background music playing in the video store when he goes to rent *Where there’s a Will there’s a Way* is significant; that movie is the mechanism by which Jake as Adam Bell is introduced to his alter-ego Jake as Anthony Claire; etc.

Notice the level of detail to which Stuckman attends. The more detail you provide, the better you will be able to explicate, to make sense of, the complete text, and the more convincing your reader will find your essay.

Notice also that Stuckman uses the repetitive spider symbols throughout the movie as the means of holding our attention / keeping us in suspense, but also as the core of his analysis. *Try to find something that runs through the text you are analysing, and use it similarly in your analyses.*

7) After leading us through the movie detail by detail, Stuckman “concludes” by precisely explaining the spider symbolism (this occurs from about eighteen and a half minutes into the video to twenty two and a half minutes) then his most important moment of enlightenment is the concluding explanation of why Gyllenhal’s character views that shocking final incarnation of the giant spider with indifferent acceptance. It’s not always necessary to explain the title of a work, but in this case Stuckman thinks it is—I agree—and he then offers his explanation of who is the *Enemy*.

References

Broadview Introduction to Literature, Concise Edition. Eds. Lisa Chalykoff, Neta Gordon, & Paul Lumsden. Peterborough, ON: Broadview Press, 2015.

Cunningham, Richard. “The Surreal Spiders of the GTA.” *Fictitious Acadia Review*. April, 2025: 21-38.

Stuckman, Chris. *Enemy Explained*. Youtube video.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v9AWkqRwd1I>

Specific Formatting Instructions for the Second Paper, Fall 2022

Specific formatting instructions

No title page.

Do NOT underline, italicize, or boldface your title. Give your paper a meaningful, communicative title.

Single-space your name beneath your title, both centered above your first paragraph.

Double-space your text.

Do NOT space between paragraphs any larger than between the lines within each paragraph.

Number your pages from 2 ff.

Have margins on all four sides of approximately 1" or 2.4cm.

Your paper needs to be as long or as short as it needs to be for you to offer your reader a better understanding of the short story you are trying to explain.

Proofread your writing before submitting your paper. If I write "Proofread" three times on your paper, I will stop at the third time and your grade will be F.

Grading Rationale

1. Can a person better understand the short story after reading your paper?
2. Have you made use of secondary sources, and cited them properly?
3. Does your paper have a properly formatted list of References (by whatever name)?
4. Is your paper carefully written, and have you obeyed all the specific formatting rules enumerated above?