

The University of Akron
Ben Auburn Award
What Is Cultural Criticism?

Cultural criticism is the practice of closely analyzing a cultural object, practice, or trend—and then offering a reasoned interpretation and evaluation of what it *means*, what *values* it expresses, what it *assumes* about people and the world, and what it *does* in society (who it benefits, who it excludes, what it normalizes). Strong cultural criticism combines evidence (details from the object and relevant context) with judgment (a defensible claim about significance, quality, impact, or implications).

For the Ben Auburn Award, “cultural criticism” is defined broadly: it doesn’t exist to vilify society, but to identify and assess trends in “arts, aesthetics, and ideas,” across *both* “high culture” and popular culture, and it can appear in many media (not just essays).

What “counts” as cultural criticism for the Ben Auburn Award

We explicitly encourage work in multiple forms—e.g., a series of related reviews; an extended essay/article; audio/video/filmed programs; exhibitions; performances; and even imaginative works (poems/fiction) primarily designed to reflect on other imaginative works.

That means your submission can be traditional academic writing *or* public-facing criticism—so long as it demonstrates thoughtful analysis and commentary, reflective judgment, sustained knowledge/taste, and original thinking/expression.

Examples of *products* that are cultural criticism (assignment / project-style)

A) Written criticism (classic formats)

- Critical essay (1,500–3,000 words): Argue how a film/album/game constructs “the good life,” gender, class, nation, etc., using close reading + context.
- Review essay (comparative): Review 2–3 works (e.g., two adaptations + the source text) to assess what changes reveal about audiences and the moment.
- Series of related reviews (3–5 short pieces): A themed “mini-column” (e.g., campus dining as culture; TikTok “study culture”; true-crime ethics).
- Op-ed / public essay: A persuasive cultural argument written for a general audience (with evidence, not just opinion).
- Annotated “cultural object dossier”: Short critical narrative + curated artifacts (ads, screenshots, packaging, lyrics, comments) with analysis captions.

B) Audio criticism

- Podcast episode (10–20 min): A scripted critical analysis of a cultural trend (e.g., “quiet luxury,” BookTok, masculinity influencers).
- Audio program / curated listening show: Music or sound clips sequenced to *illustrate* a trend, with commentary between segments.

- Interview-based audio essay: Interview 2–3 people (with consent), then critically interpret how their experiences reflect a broader cultural shift.

C) Video / filmed criticism

- Video essay (6–12 min): Voiceover + clips/stills (fair-use mindful) analyzing form + meaning (editing, camera, sound, pacing, framing).
- Mini-documentary (8–15 min): A cultural practice on campus/community (tailgating, thrift culture, faith communities, commuter life) with an argument, not just description.
- Explainer with critique: “How X works—and what it does to us” (e.g., recommendation algorithms; influencer sponsorships; fast fashion hauls).

D) Visual / design-based criticism

- Exhibition (physical or virtual): Curate objects/images with interpretive labels that advance a thesis—explicitly included as a possible form.
- Photo essay with critical captions: A campus/city space as a text (signage, architecture, accessibility, surveillance, public art).
- Zine / chapbook of criticism: Short critical fragments + visuals (ads, collage) that build a sustained argument.
- Infographic + interpretive memo: Data visualization paired with critical interpretation (e.g., “attention economy” metrics; streaming economics; NIL culture).

E) Performance / embodied criticism

- Spoken-word set or staged reading that critiques a cultural phenomenon (with an artist statement explaining the critical target and choices).
- Short theatrical scene that “tests” a social script (e.g., customer-service politeness, gender expectations, classroom dynamics) and then a reflective critical commentary.
- Gallery-style performance installation designed to make an argument through audience experience—also explicitly recognized as eligible.

F) Imaginative writing *as* criticism

- Short story that critiques a genre: e.g., a cozy mystery that exposes the class politics of “quaint villages.”
- Poem sequence responding to media: Poems in dialogue with a TV season, album, or meme ecology—plus a short critical preface.
- Retelling / adaptation with commentary: A creative adaptation of a myth/game narrative plus a reflective critical rationale about what the changes *mean* culturally.

G) Digital/public humanities criticism

- Curated web exhibit: Artifacts + interpretive writing that makes an argument.

- Critical thread / micro-essay series: A sequence of tightly argued posts (e.g., 8–12 posts) that functions as a “serial essay.”
- Wikipedia / public-knowledge intervention (with reflection): Improve coverage of an underrepresented cultural object + write a short critique of knowledge gatekeeping.
- Map-based cultural critique: Spatial argument (e.g., “where culture happens” vs. “where resources go”).

H) “Criticism of criticism” (meta-critical projects)

- Reception study: Compare professional reviews vs. audience comments; analyze what standards of “good” are operating and why.
- Platform analysis: Critique how a platform (Spotify, TikTok, Goodreads) shapes taste, attention, and cultural authority.
- Genre history mini-monograph (short): Trace the evolution of a genre trope and argue what cultural work it performs.

A submission is usually strong cultural criticism if it can answer:

1. What is the object/trend, precisely?
2. What’s your thesis (your judgment/claim of significance)?
3. What evidence (close details + context) supports it?
4. Why does it matter (cultural stakes, effects, values, power)?
5. Why this form/medium for this argument? (important because the Award invites many media)

How to present an *untraditional artifact* in 5–7 minutes (podcast/video/exhibit/performance)

A. Use a tight talk structure (time-boxed)

- Name the object/trend and state your one-sentence claim.
- One key context point; one reason it matters.
- For each: *show/play a short clip or still (10–20 sec max)* → interpret → link back to thesis.
- Trend you identified; implications; who's affected.
- Restate claim in new words; give one question the work leaves us with.

B. Make the artifact understandable` fast (especially for audio/video)

- Bring a “listening/viewing guide” slide/handout with:
 - your thesis (1 sentence),
 - 3 evidence moments (timestamps or screenshots),
 - 3 keywords (e.g., “taste,” “status,” “attention”).
- Use extremely short clips: 10–20 seconds is enough to *anchor* analysis without hijacking the talk.
- Caption what the audience should notice (“Listen for the shift in tone,” “Notice what’s absent,” “Watch how framing isolates...”).

C. If it’s an exhibit/performance

- Open with the curatorial/artist statement (your argument in 2–3 sentences).
- Walk the audience through 2–3 stations/choices (why this object, why this arrangement, why this sequence).
- Translate experience into claim: “The piece *does* X to the viewer to demonstrate Y about the culture.”

D. What judges are listening for:

- Thoughtful analysis + commentary
- Reflective, careful judgment (not just reaction)
- Sustained knowledge/taste (command of the object and its context)
- Original thinking/expression