

Learning Skills, Room 120

Writing Critical Reviews

What is a critical review?

A critical review of a book, chapter, article, or film includes a *summary* and a *critical commentary*. Being “critical” does not mean being negative; it means *understanding, analyzing, and evaluating* the piece of work. In order to do this fairly and effectively, you should put the piece of writing in *context* and you should use relevant *criteria*. Here is some information about each of these aspects of critical review:

Understanding the piece

- Who is the author’s intended audience?
- What is the author’s purpose? (describe, explain, persuade, argue, etc.)
- What is the author’s perspective? (theoretical and research)
- Why is the piece structured in the way it is?
- What is the methodology?
- What are the stated conclusions or findings? Unstated or inferred?

Putting the piece in context

- When was it produced? What is the historical context?
- Why was it produced? (In response to a previous piece? As part of an on-going discussion? To prove a point? As an alternative perspective? To raise awareness? To establish a cause-and-effect relationship? As a result of research?)
- How does it build on existing understanding of the topic?
- Where/how does it fit in the discipline or field of study?

Summarizing the piece

- This should be brief; reduce the piece to its main points - do not include evidence and details
- What is the context?
- What is the author’s purpose?
- How is the piece structured?
- What are the main conclusions or findings?

Analyzing the piece

- What is the perspective?
- What is the thesis or argument?
- What are the main ideas that support the thesis?
- How are these ideas supported? (discussion, research, statistics, etc.)
- How do the main ideas interrelate, connect, and influence each other?
- Can you identify assumptions that are not actually stated?

- Are there possible purposes for the piece that are not actually stated?
- Are there any steps or parts of the argument that are not logical?

Evaluating the piece

- The critical evaluation should be a balanced discussion of the strengths and weaknesses of the piece. This involves measuring the piece against specific criteria and making both positive and negative judgments about it in terms of merit and contribution. See below for some ideas for criteria.
- Provide a final evaluation (of the whole piece) that sums up your opinion of the balance between strengths and weakness.
- Refer to the author and the author's perspective. Use "reporting" language such as "The author argues..." and "Greene describes..." and "Brown concludes..."
- Use "evaluation vocabulary" such as "outstanding," "unsatisfactory," "innovative", "inventive", etc.

For a good list of such words, go to

<http://webuser.bus.umich.edu/Organizations/umbstoastmasters/file/members/feedback/evalVocab.pdf>

Considering criteria for evaluation

- Timeliness
- Originality of contribution
- Logic of the argument
- Validity of evidence
- Validity and application of theoretical framework
- Appropriateness, strength, and thoroughness of methodology
- Soundness and clarity of conclusions or findings
- The value or impact of the piece compared to others
- The appropriateness of the piece for the intended audience
- Other?

How should a critical review be structured?

- Whether or not you use headings, your review should include the following sections:
 - **Introduction:** background information, title, author, author info, importance of topic, purpose of piece, brief summary, overall impression
 - **Summary:** key points with limited examples, organization of piece
 - **Critique:** strengths and weakness based on specific criteria; reference to other sources; go from most to least important conclusions; if more positive than negative, present the negative points first, and vice versa
 - **Conclusion:** restate your overall opinion of the piece; present recommendations
 - **References:** use standard style (MLA/APA) list other references used in critique.

Adapted from Writing a Critical Review <https://student.unsw.edu.au/writing-critical-review> and <http://www.docs.fce.unsw.edu.au/fce/EDU/eduwritingcritreview.pdf>