

Critical Reviews

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When you are asked to write a critical review of a non-fiction book or article, you will need to identify, summarize, and evaluate the ideas and information the author has presented. In other words, you will be examining another person's thoughts on a topic from your own point of view. This viewpoint is your stand as a reviewer. Your stand must go beyond your "gut reaction" to the work and be based on your knowledge (drawn from readings, lecture, experience) of the topic as well as on criteria stated in your assignment or discussed by your instructor. Make your stand clear at the beginning of your review, in your evaluations of specific parts, and in your concluding commentary. Remember, as well, that your goal should be to make a few key points about the book or article, not to discuss everything the author writes.

To achieve this objective, you will have to analyze (take apart) the work--decide what its major components are and determine how those parts (i.e., paragraphs, sections, or chapters) contribute to the work as a whole. Analyzing the work will help you focus on how and why the author makes certain points and prevent you from merely summarizing what the author says. Assuming the role of an analytical reader will also help you determine whether or not the author fulfills the stated purpose of the book or article and enhances your understanding of a particular topic.

As you discuss the author's major points, be sure to distinguish consistently between the author's opinions and your own. Keep the summary portions of your discussion concise, remembering that your task as a reviewer is to *re-see* the author's work, not just to re-tell it. If you refer to ideas from other books and articles or from lecture and course materials, always document your sources. Include only that material which has relevance for your review, and use direct quotations selectively.

Here are some strategies to help you organize your thinking and your writing about a book or article:

1. Assess your assignment thoroughly before you read the article or book

Your instructor may have included specific guidelines for you to follow. These will influence what you look for as you read. Also note where the work connects with what you've studied in the course. You can make the most efficient use of your reading and note taking time if you are an active reader; that is, as you read, keep relevant questions in mind and jot down page numbers as well as your responses to ideas that appear to be significant.

2. Begin your review with an introduction appropriate to your assignment

If your assignment asks you to review only one book and not to use outside sources, your introduction will focus on identifying the author, the title, the main topic or issue presented in the book, and the author's purpose in writing the book. If your assignment asks you to review the book as it relates to issues or themes discussed in the course or to review two or more books on the same topic, your introduction must also establish those goals. For example, before you can review two books on a topic, you must explain to your reader in your introduction how they are related to one another. Within this shared context (or under this "umbrella"), you can then review comparable aspects of both books, pointing out where the authors agree and differ. In other words, the more complicated your assignment is, the more your introduction must accomplish. Finally, the introduction to a book review is always the place for you to establish your position as the reviewer (your thesis about the author's thesis).

3. Provide an overview

An overview supplies your reader with certain general information not appropriate to include in the introduction but necessary for understanding the body of the review. Generally, an overview describes the book or article's division into chapters, sections, or points of discussion. An overview may also include background information about the topic, about your stand, or about the criteria you will use for evaluation. The overview and the introduction work together to provide a comprehensive beginning for (a "springboard" into) your review.

4. Organize the body of your review according to a logical plan

Here are two options:

- First, summarize, in a series of paragraphs, those major points from the book that you plan to discuss; incorporating each major point into a topic sentence for a paragraph is an effective organizational strategy. Second, discuss and evaluate those points in a subsequent group of paragraphs. (This option divides the body of your review into two major blocks: a block of summary and a block of evaluation. There are two dangers lurking in this pattern--you may allot too many paragraphs to summary and too few to evaluation, or you may re-summarize too many points from the book in your evaluation section.)
- Summarize and evaluate the major points you have chosen from the book using a point-by-point schema. That means you will state and evaluate one point within the same paragraph (or in several if the point is significant and warrants extended discussion) before you state and evaluate a second point, a third, etc., moving in a logical sequence from point to point to point. Here again, it is effective to use the topic sentence of each paragraph to identify the point from the book that you plan to summarize and evaluate.

5. Use the conclusion to state your overall critical evaluation

You have already discussed the major points the author makes, examined how the author supports arguments, and evaluated the quality or effectiveness of specific aspects of the book or article. Now you must make an evaluation of the work as a whole, determining such things as whether or not the author achieves the stated or implied purpose of the book or article and if the work makes a significant contribution to an existing body of knowledge. Consider the following questions:

- How well has the author achieved the overall purpose of the book or article?
- What is the most important final comment you wish to make about the book or article? What has reading this work done for you or demonstrated to you?

Please note: The length of your introduction and overview, the number of points you choose to review, and the length of your conclusion should be proportionate to the page limit stated in your assignment and should reflect the complexity of the material being reviewed as well as the expectations of our reader.