

Writing a Critical Review

This type of assignment can be referred to in a number of different ways: literature review, article review, article critique, critical review, and critical analysis. However, the aim is the same for any of these assignments: to evaluate how a writer has constructed his/her argument and analyze its strengths and weaknesses rather than evaluating the content of the argument itself.

TIP: Ask yourself the question “What is the writer doing, not just saying, to make the points he/she is making?”

A critical review requires you to question the information and opinions in a text and present your evaluation or judgement of the text. To do this well, you should attempt to understand the topic from different perspectives (i.e. read related texts) and in relation to the theories, approaches and frameworks in your course.

Suggested structure

Introduction

Include a few opening sentences that introduce the author(s) and the title, and briefly explain the topic of the text. Present the aim of the text and summarize the main finding or key argument. Conclude the introduction with a brief statement of your evaluation of the text. This can be a positive or negative evaluation, or, as is usually the case, a mixed response.

Summary

Present a summary of the key points along with a limited number of examples. You can also briefly explain the author’s purpose/intentions throughout the text and you may briefly describe how the text is organized. The summary should only make up about a third of the critical review.

Critique

The critique should be a balanced discussion and evaluation of the strengths, weakness and notable features of the text. Remember to base your discussion on specific criteria. Good reviews also include other sources to support your evaluation (remember to reference).

Here are some questions to consider when developing your evaluation:

Who is the intended audience?

What is the author’s purpose? To survey and summarize research on a topic? To present an argument that builds on past research? To refute another writer’s argument?

Does the author define important terms?

Is the information in the article fact or opinion? (Facts can be verified, while opinions arise from interpretations of facts.) Does the information seem well-researched or is it unsupported?

What are the author’s central arguments or conclusions? Are they clearly stated? Are they supported by evidence and analysis?

If the article reports on an experiment or study, does the author clearly outline methodology and the expected result?

Is the article lacking information or argumentation that you expected to find?

Is the article organized logically and easy to follow?

Does the writer's style suit the intended audience? Is the style stilted or unnecessarily complicated?

Is the author's language objective or charged with emotion and bias?

If illustrations or charts are used, are they effective in presenting information?

You can also choose how to sequence your critique. Here are some examples to get you started:

Present the conclusions you make about the text in order from most important to least important.

If your critique is more positive than negative, then present the negative points first and the positive last.

If your critique is more negative than positive, then present the positive points first and the negative last.

Conclusion

This is usually a very short paragraph.

Restate your overall opinion of the text.

Briefly present your recommendations.

If necessary, some further qualification or explanation of your judgement can be included. This can help your critique sound fair and reasonable.

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