



CSU Learning Skills: *your link to success*

Academic writing

Writing a critical review

What is a critical review?

In very simply terms, a critical review or appraisal is an academic review of an article that offers both a summary and critical comment.

Book reviews, movie reviews, critical reviews and literature reviews all perform a similar task of evaluating or appraising how well various texts and artistic productions achieve their goals of communicating with the reader, or a wider audience. Project reviews evaluate whether the goals of a project have been achieved. They are not necessarily based on an appraisal of a text, but the process of critical evaluation is similar.

As this is a general discussion of what a critical review is, you should consult your Subject Outline or subject coordinator to find out what structure and content to include when completing a critical review as an assessment task.

Types of critical reviews

Reviews include:

- appraisals of the artistic merit of movies or music albums;
- assessments of the effectiveness of government programs in catering for specific public needs;
- evaluations of the merit of an academic article or body of literature to the development of research and understanding of knowledge within a specific discipline (Northey, 2005, p. 35).

A critical review is an academic appraisal of an article that offers both a summary and critical comment on the content. This makes it different to a literature review, which examines a body of literature or series of key academic articles addressing a specific topic of interest. A literature review is an important part of preparing to write a full thesis paper (Wallace & Wray, 2006, p.177).

Why write a critical review?

Here are a number of reasons why a critical review is written:

- To analyse the text and evaluate its relevance to your academic needs;
- To analyse, describe and interpret a text to show your understanding of what you have read;
- In some university courses, you are asked to write critical reviews in order to demonstrate that you:
- Understand the main points;
- Can analyse the main arguments or findings;
- Can evaluate the article using relevant criteria which you or the subject coordinator has selected.

In order to write a critical review, you have to be able to read and think critically. These skills are just as important in daily life as they are for academic study. They help you to:

- Remain informed about issues relevant to your field of work;
- Assess and comment on problems you may encounter in work or domestic situations;
- Evaluate the solutions proposed by others;
- Generate alternative solutions (Wallace & Wray, 2006, p. 177).

A critical review is not just a summary. It is an evaluation of what an author has said about a topic. It is *critical* in the sense that it:

- is a thoughtful consideration of the validity and accuracy of the author's claims;
- considers the benefits and limitations of the author's point of view;
- identifies other valid points of view (Hart, 1998, p. 176).

Qualities of an effective critical review

To be effective a critical review must:

1. Engage the reader by indicating clearly what the reviewed article is about;
2. Take an investigative approach to examining the issues raised, rather than attempting to progressively discredit each point which is made (Fairburn & Winch, 1996, pp. 207-8);
3. Identify the strengths and weaknesses of the article, giving credit for new perspectives about the topic and checking that they are supported appropriately;
4. Evaluate the contribution of the article to developing a greater public knowledge and understanding of the topic (Hay, 1996, pp. 40-41).

Planning your review

Clanchy and Ballard (1991, pp. 91-92) indicate that there are several steps to follow before you start writing your critical review:

1. Gain an initial overview of the text by skimming:
 - Title
 - Abstract (if any)
 - Introduction
 - Subheadings (if any)
 - Conclusion
2. Read the article in order to identify its aims and main ideas.
3. Re-read the article in detail, analysing the key content, and making notes:
 - Highlight the main ideas
 - Make brief notes:
 - in the margin,
 - on paper
 - create a mindmap.
4. Check your notes to make sure they include:
 - The purpose of the article
 - The methods used by the authors to collect the information
 - The main findings.
5. Use your notes to write a summary of the text.

Organising your review

As is the case with most of the writing you do at university, which is formal writing, a review should have an introduction, body and conclusion. However, if you are given a specific format in the Subject Outline, you should of course follow that.

Introduction (10%)

- Identify the article you are reviewing, including the title of the text, the author's name and their expertise in the field being addressed in the article.
- Identify the purpose and context in which the article was written.
- Identify your purpose in writing the review and how your examination of the text will address the topic or problem you wish to resolve.
- Summarise the main issues raised by the author of the text (Wallace & Wray, 2006, p. 117).

Body (80%)

- Analyse the key points made in the text.
- Evaluate the validity of the evidence used to support each point. Decide whether the conclusions which are reached are convincing when applied in a general sense as well as in the specific situations described in text. This should include both the strengths and weaknesses of the claims made in the article.
- Clearly distinguish between the views of the author and others (Northey, 2005, pp. 38-39).

Conclusion (10%)

- Summarise your evaluation of the text.
- Make a judgement about the credibility of the overall claims made in the text.
- Evaluate the usefulness of the text in addressing the issues you wished to resolve in your review (Wallace & Wray, 2006, p. 118).

Additional web resources

A useful site providing a sample review from Clanchy and Ballard (1985), with commentary on the features that make it effective.

<http://arts.monash.edu.au/lis/resources-good-crit-review.pdf>

These sites provide structured information about how to write a critical review. The second site provides an extract from a critical review written by a student, with some commentary on how it is structured.

<http://www.lc.unsw.edu.au/onlib/critrev.html>

<http://www.lc.unsw.edu.au/onlib/critrev2.html>

Critical review writing, Teaching & Learning Unit, Faculty of Economics and Commerce, The University of Melbourne

<http://tlu.ecom.unimelb.edu.au/pdfs/criticalreviewwriting.pdf>

For the busy student the following site provides a one page description of how to write a critical review.

<http://www.elssa.uts.edu.au/programs/EDUHSSworkshops/2007/Critical%20Review.pdf>

If you like detailed explanations of how to do things, this site provides an extensive description of how to write critical reviews for readers in the discipline of Psychology.

<http://www.psy.gla.ac.uk/~steve/resources/crs.html>

References

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