

Suggestions for Writing Critical Reviews of Journal Articles

http://umanitoba.ca/libraries/units/dafoe/media/reviews_of_journal_articles.pdf

A critical review of a journal article is an evaluation of the article's strengths, weaknesses and validity. It is used to inform readers of an article's value through explanation, interpretation and analysis. The reviewer must present information that will allow the reader to make a value judgement about the article.

The guidelines and questions listed below are suggestions that should be considered when writing a critical review of an article. Not all of the questions or guidelines will be appropriate for every article, depending upon the purpose of the review.

Guidelines and questions to be considered

- Reviews should begin with a full bibliographic citation (author, title of journal article, name of journal, volume, issue, date of publication, pages).
- Is there any biographical information provided about the author? What are the author's qualifications and authority?
- Who is the intended audience?
- What is the objective or purpose of the research? Is it clearly stated?
- Does the author try to build on past research?
- Does the author define any terms? Are the definitions specific, useful, circular?
- What is the effect of the author's language? Are the vocabulary and sentence structure appropriate? Does the author maintain neutrality in his/her choice of words and terms or are they emotionally charged or biased?
- Are references given (footnotes or bibliography)? What is the size of the reference section? Are the references recent, important? How are the references used: for support, rebuttal, etc.?
- If the article is a report of a research study, does the author clearly state what was expected to happen? What was the sample for the study and how was it selected? Does the author discuss factors or variables that may have affected the research? Are the methods for measuring results clearly explained and appropriate? Did the expected result occur?
- Are illustrations, tables or graphs used? Do they complement the text? Are they the best method to present data, or are they unnecessary?
- What are the author's major findings and conclusions? Have these been supported by the author's analyses, arguments, findings or evidence? Has the author overlooked anything?

- Is the article referred to by anyone else? (Check the Social Sciences Citation Index for this information.) How is the article used by other authors: background, support, rebuttal, etc.?
- Does the author accomplish the objective?
- Does the author give suggestions for further research or discussion?

Style

Use your own words. If you use those of the author, show the page number in parentheses. Use a footnote if the quotation is from another source. Consult a style manual for more precise details on style.

Do not try to write your review by answering all the above-mentioned questions one by one. Some will not be relevant to your particular book.

Structure of a critical review: One approach

Critical reviews, both short (one page) and long (four pages), usually have a similar structure. Check your assignment instructions for formatting and structural specifications. Headings are usually optional for longer reviews and can be helpful for the reader.

Introduction

The length of an introduction is usually one paragraph for a journal article review and two or three paragraphs for a longer book review. Include a few opening sentences that announce the author(s) and the title, and briefly explain the topic of the text. Present the aim of the text and summarise 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 organised. 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).

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

- Most important to least important conclusions you make about the text.
- 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.
- If there are both strengths and weakness for each criterion you use, you need to decide overall what your judgement is. For example, you may want to comment on a key idea in the text and have both positive and negative comments. You could begin by stating what is good about the idea and then concede and explain how it is limited in some way. While this example shows a mixed evaluation, overall you are probably being more negative than positive.
- In long reviews, you can address each criteria you choose in a paragraph, including both negative and positive points. For very short critical reviews (one page or less) where your comments will be briefer, include a paragraph of positive aspects and another of negative.
- You can also include recommendations for how the text can be improved in terms of ideas, research approach; theories or frameworks used can also be included in the critique section.

Conclusion

This is usually a very short paragraph.

- Restate your overall opinion of the text.
- Briefly present recommendations.
- If necessary some further qualification or explanation of your judgement can be included.

This can help your critique sound fair and reasonable.

References

If you have used other sources in you review you should also include a list of references at the end of the review.