
Critical Review

A critical review evaluates the strengths and weaknesses of a particular source of information. A typical critical review includes a description of the source, an analysis of the content, and a review that allows readers to reflect on the source's value.

Academic journal articles are scholarly papers that contribute to ongoing conversations or debates around a specific topic, often focusing on a specific point of view or research project. Scholarly writing has a very specific, formal tone, and may take longer to read than other forms of writing. Be aware of the time you will need to complete a well-written critical review. Allow yourself the time to find articles, read critically, prepare an outline, write your first draft, and then review your work.

Reading Critically

One strategy for reading an academic article is to do three passes, strategically focusing on a different part each time. Once you have completed this process, you should be able to write a short summary of the material in your own words.

1. On the first pass:

- Focus on the framework, or the “bones” of the paper:
 - Abstract
 - Introduction and conclusion
 - Section headings
 - Tables and diagrams (including captions)
- Ask yourself the following:
 - What is the point/thesis of this paper?
 - What are the main arguments?
 - Are there any sections you feel you should read more about?
- Highlight anything you feel is important or which requires more focus.

2. On the second pass:

- “Dig into” the paper:
 - Read in-depth, paying close attention to the purpose and conclusions of each major section. Try to keep the ‘big picture’ in mind.
- Ask yourself:
 - Did the author(s) do what they set out to do?
 - Are their arguments consistent?
 - Is there sufficient evidence for each point?
 - Are there other points of view which they do not address here?

3. The third pass is the time for reflection and analysis using critical thinking skills:

- Why is this article important to your field of study?
- What can be done with this information?
- Are their methods valid?
- Are their arguments fluid and logical?
- What assumptions did they make?
- Are there any obvious biases in play?
 - (e.g. funding from an interested group, conflicts of interest, etc.)

Writing Critically

A critical review is similar to other academic papers in that it will have the same basic structure: an introduction, a succinct summary of the article, an evaluation of the article, and a conclusion. If you have been given multiple articles to critique, look for links or common themes between them as you compare and contrast.

Introduction

The first part of your paper should provide a brief orientation to your topic, and contain your thesis statement. In the case of a critical review, you should also be sure to specify the names of the authors and introduce the article or articles you are critiquing. Remember that your reader may not have read that article, and will need a brief overview of the goals of that research.

The thesis statement of a critique will usually take the form of a stance or argument about the quality of the articles you are reviewing. Your goal is to inform the reader—typically another scholar or practicing professional in your field—about the importance of this article and the implications of it. All of the evidence you bring into your paper will support the thesis statement, making it the most important structural element in academic writing. The ASC has an additional handout that focuses on how to form an effective thesis statement.

Body

The body of your paper supports your thesis statement with evidence. For instance, if your analysis of the journal article suggests that the article contains bias, then the body of your paper would demonstrate, using examples as evidence, why you make that argument. Your analysis may contain several key points. Ensure to provide evidence for each point, and tie all of your points to the main message of your thesis statement.

Conclusion

As with other papers, the conclusion of a critical review should restate the thesis and summarize your main points. A conclusion should be succinct and should not introduce any new information.