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# How to Write Critical Reviews

## Overview

When you are asked to write a critical review of a 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 point of view.

Your stand must go beyond your “gut reaction” to the work and be based on your knowledge (readings, lecture, experience) of the topic as well as on factors such as criteria stated in your assignment or discussed by you and your instructor.

Make your stand clear at the beginning of your review, in your evaluations of specific parts, and in your concluding commentary.

Remember that your goal should be to make a few key points about the book or article, not to discuss everything the author writes.

## Understanding the Assignment

To write a good critical review, you will have to engage in the mental processes of analyzing (taking apart) the work—deciding what its major components are and determining how these 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 to determine whether or not the author fulfills the stated purpose of the book or article and enhances your understanding or knowledge of a particular topic.

**Be sure to read your assignment thoroughly before you read the article or book.**

Your instructor may have included specific guidelines for you to follow. Keeping these guidelines in mind as you read the article or book can really help you write your paper!

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 notetaking time if you are an active reader; that is, keep relevant questions in mind and jot down page numbers as well as your responses to ideas that appear to be significant as you read.



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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 your reader.

## Write the introduction

**Below are a few guidelines to help you write the introduction to your critical review.**

### Introduce your review appropriately

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 encompass those expectations.

### Explain relationships

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).

As you write, consider the following questions:

- Is the book a memoir, a treatise, a collection of facts, an extended argument, etc.? Is the article a documentary, a write-up of primary research, a position paper, etc.?
- Who is the author? What does the preface or foreword tell you about the author's purpose, background, and credentials? What is the author's approach to the topic (as a journalist? a historian? a researcher?)?
- What is the main topic or problem addressed? How does the work relate to a discipline, to a profession, to a particular audience, or to other works on the topic?
- What is your critical evaluation of the work (your thesis)? Why have you taken that position? What criteria are you basing your position on?

### Provide an overview

In your introduction, you will also want to provide an overview. An overview supplies your reader with certain general information not appropriate for including in the introduction but necessary to understanding the body of the review.

Generally, an overview describes your book'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.

As you write, consider the following questions:

- What are the author's basic premises? What issues are raised, or what themes emerge? What situation (i.e., racism on college campuses) provides a basis for the author's assertions?
- How informed is my reader? What background information is relevant to the entire book and should be placed here rather than in a body paragraph?

## Write the body

**The body is the center of your paper, where you draw out your main arguments.**

**Below are some guidelines to help you write it.**

### Organize using a logical plan

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 these points in a following group of paragraphs. (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.)
- Alternatively, you can summarize and evaluate the major points you have chosen from the book in a point-by-point schema. That means you will discuss and evaluate point one within the same paragraph (or in several if the point is significant and warrants extended discussion) before you summarize and evaluate point two, point three, 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 or evaluate.

### Questions to keep in mind as you write

With either organizational pattern, consider the following questions:

- What are the author's most important points? How do these relate to one another? (Make relationships clear by using transitions: "In contrast," "an equally strong argument," "moreover," "a final conclusion," etc.).
- What types of evidence or information does the author present to support his or her points? Is this evidence convincing, controversial, factual, one-sided, etc.? (Consider the use of primary historical material, case studies, narratives, recent scientific findings, statistics.)
- Where does the author do a good job of conveying factual material as well as personal perspective? Where does the author fail to do so? If solutions to a problem are offered, are they believable, misguided, or promising?
- Which parts of the work (particular arguments, descriptions, chapters, etc.) are most effective and which parts are least effective? Why?
- Where (if at all) does the author convey personal prejudice, support illogical relationships, or present evidence out of its appropriate context?

### Keep your opinions distinct and cite your sources

Remember, 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 to re-tell it.

And, importantly, if you refer to ideas from other books and articles or from lecture and course materials, always document your sources, or else you might wander into the realm of plagiarism.

Include only that material which has relevance for your review and use direct quotations sparingly. The Writing Center has other handouts to help you [paraphrase text and introduce quotations](https://writing.wisc.edu/handbook/quoting/sources/). (<https://writing.wisc.edu/handbook/quoting/sources/>)

## Write the conclusion

You will want to 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 and if the work makes a significant contribution to an existing body of knowledge.

Consider the following questions:

- Is the work appropriately subjective or objective according to the author's purpose?
- How well does the work maintain its stated or implied focus? Does the author present extraneous material? Does the author exclude or ignore relevant information?
- How well has the author achieved the overall purpose of the book or article? What contribution does the work make to an existing body of knowledge or to a specific group of readers? Can you justify the use of this work in a particular course?
- What is the most important final comment you wish to make about the book or article? Do you have any suggestions for the direction of future research in the area? What has reading this work done for you or demonstrated to you?



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