Writing Critical Reviews: A Step-by-Step Guide

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Chapter 11

Writing critical reviews: A step-by-step guide

Chapter summary

This chapter covers the following topics:

- A step-by-step process for writing a critical review
- Make your academic 'voice' clear when writing a critical review
- Critical review language
- Writing an annotated bibliography

1. Introduction

A critical review (sometimes called a **summary and critique**) is similar to a literature review (see **Chapter 15, Writing a Literature Review**), except that it is a review of *one* article. This is an important piece of assessment that is more difficult than it may appear.

The process of critically reviewing an article can seem intimidating. How, you may worry, can you think of things to say about an article written by an expert? What if you can't find anything to 'criticize'? How will you avoid just producing a summary? Also, how should you structure the review? This chapter provides step-by-step instructions on how to do it.

2. A procedure for writing a critical review

Step 1: Skim read the article to get a general idea of what it is about. (This should take you about 10-15 minutes or less. See **Chapter 5, Reading: A complex skill**.) You are looking for the 'gist' of the article.
Step 2: Discuss the article with someone else. Write down the general ideas / themes. Discussing the article may clarify your understanding and trigger some initial ideas.
Step 3: Read the article again and take notes of the important details: the *subject(s)* of the article, the *conclusion(s)*, and the *arguments* evidence and / or *data* that the

writer advances in order to reach these conclusion(s). Now compare your notes with someone else. Note differences and similarities in the points you have written down. If there are major differences in your notes, go back and check the article again. Be sure you are clear about the main points.

Step 4: Check the main points of the article once more. Make sure your notes 'agree' with the points raised by the writer. (You should be able to point to evidence from the text to confirm that your notes are accurate.) Write out a quick **flow diagram** of the article, taking the main points of each paragraph. The point of the diagram is to show the relationships between the main points in the article. Even better you might consider doing an **argument map** (see **Chapter 9, Critical thinking**).

Step 5: Put the article aside and think about what you have read. Good critical review writing requires careful deliberation and clear thinking. Don't be afraid to have a strong response to the argument of the article. Indeed, this can help in articulating a good review.

Step 6: Read through your notes again and look at the diagram you have made. Can you think of any *criticisms* that you have about the article? (These may include questions, disagreements, doubts and so on.) You are *not* criticizing the *author* here, just the points raised in the article. These criticisms could include:

- Theoretical claims being made
- Evidence used
- Case method procedure used
- Methodological techniques used
- Sample size, population used in study, etc.
- Statistical support used
- Use of other writers' arguments.

Now, can you think of anything you *agree with* in the article? Perhaps you can think of a further application of one of the writer's ideas, for example. Any strong response that you have to the article is generally useful. When you have finished, compare your criticisms and agreements with those of another person. Note that for *every* academic article there is always something to clarify, criticize or take issue with. No piece of writing is *ever* perfect, even if it is written by international experts. You can devise and use a template for this purpose. See, for example, the **critical synopsis template** provided at the end of this chapter (adapted from Wallace & Wray, 2020).

Step 7: Now begin to write the introduction to your review. This should be about 10 per cent of the total review. It should be short and largely in your own words.

You will need to include in the introduction:

- a *general overview* of the article;
- an overview of *your review* (your approach to the article);
- an anticipation of *your conclusion* (i.e. what you will say about the major ideas expressed in the article).

In introducing the article, you should mention the author's name and the title of the article, as well as referencing the article using a conventional referencing system. (A bibliography listing the complete reference details should be included at the end of your review.) Note that since a critical review is a personal response to an article, it is typically written in the **first person**, although there can be discipline-specific variations on this.

> In this paper I will discuss Pierre Ryckmans' article 'On the University' (*give reference*). Ryckmans' article is about (*say what it is about*). In particular, he argues that (*give a list of the main points*). After summarizing Ryckmans' main points, I shall be claiming that (*give a general overview of your main criticisms—**don't** give any details here*). In concluding, I shall show that (*give a quick, very brief, outline of **your** conclusion about the subject*).

Compare your version with the version of another person. (It should be similar in structure but not in the details, nor in the phrasing and words chosen.)

Step 8: Now you need to write the body of the review. This must consist of summary and criticism sections in roughly equal proportions. The summary of arguments of the writer must come first, followed by the critique (as you need the summary to understand the critique), although some critical reviews split their review up into an overall summary of the position of the writer, and then detailed summaries/critiques of specific arguments; that is, they summarize an argument and then critique it, before moving on to the next argument and critique. This difference in approach is the same as the **block style** compared to the **chain style** of essay writing (see **Chapter 14**). The important thing here is that you *balance* your criticisms with an adequate summary of the author's work.

Things to remember in writing your critical review:

- You need to show that you have read the article, so giving quotations from or paraphrasing a part of the article is useful. However, remember: don't make the quotations too long and don't quote too often. Only quote when you can't say a point better in your own words, or when you are trying to prove to the reader that the writer did in fact say something. As we saw in **Chapter 6**, a quote should not normally exceed three lines of text.
- Make sure that you summarize the main points in the article fully and maintain structural similarity to the original article, e.g. if the writer has one major theme and seven sub-themes your summary should show this by mirroring the structure of the paper in your review.
- Don't just say '*X says that …. but I think that …..*' Provide details of the work and spell out each point fully, using your own examples where possible. If you can think of implications that you think follow from the ideas, spell these out too. However, make it clear when you are summarizing the *writer's* ideas and when you are using your *own* ideas. The **voice** of the writer needs to be clear (see **critical review language**, later in this chapter).

- When spelling out the points don't assume that the reader has read the article and knows what you are talking about. Your review should *stand on its own.* The reader should have a reasonably full understanding of the contents of the article by reading your critical review.
- Don't be afraid to *criticize* the text. If you think that a point is wrong, say so and give some reasons. Equally, don't be *hypercritical* (critical of everything). If you agree with point X but disagree with point Y, say so. Or if you agree with a point but only to a certain extent, say so. In fact, a good part of your summary should be devoted to *distinguishing* those points that have merit and those that don't. Remember: no article is perfect along all dimensions. Every article has something that is debatable, and usually a lot that is good too.
- The Body should be 80 per cent of your review. Devote at least one paragraph to each main point and use topic sentences, examples / elaborations and concluding sentences in each paragraph. You should easily be able to write one page, but do not write empty sentences or repeat yourself. Write with economy. Use the **paramedic method** to prune your sentences of redundancy (see **Chapter 10**). If you can't think of anything to say, or if you find yourself rambling or repeating yourself, go back to your notes or read the article again.
- Use **critical review language** (see later in this chapter) *almost to the point of excess.* The language will prevent you from simply writing a summary. Try to use *at least* two critical review phrases in each paragraph.
- Use **connector words** or **signposting language** too ('Firstly', 'Secondly', 'Moreover', 'Furthermore', 'On the other hand'). Remember to guide the reader through the body of your review. The reader should *never* have to ask themselves 'Where is all this going?' (see below for examples of this language).
- The body of the review is the place for solid details and argument. Write as fully and completely as you can. Critical review language (see Section 4 below) can assist in this process.

Step 9: After you have written the body of the review, you need to write the conclusion. This should be about 10 per cent of the review and should include a brief recap of the main points raised in the review, noting specifically where you have agreed and disagreed with the writer. The conclusion might also give your suggestions for further research, or the contexts in which the work you have reviewed can be used. See the example below. **NB: Note change in tense.**

> In this review, I have discussed Ryckmans' article 'On the University'. Ryckmans' article covers several points (*give list of points*). I have argued that while he is right that (*give examples of where you agree with him*), this does not mean that (*give your criticisms*). My overall view of Ryckmans' paper is that (*sum up your main views*).

Step 10: Leave your critique on your desk for a day or two before looking at it again. Carefully edit and proofread it before submitting it. (See **Chapter 16, Editing and Proofreading**.)

3. Example of a critical review

Look at the example below. It is part of a summary and critique of an article written by Pierre Ryckmans, former a professor of Asian Studies at the Australian National University. Borrow this journal, read the article and then read the critical review below. (The source of the original article is: *Quadrant,* 38 (3), March 1994, pp. 12-13).

Notice four things about the review:

- While incomplete, it is carefully balanced with approximately 50 per cent for summary and 50 per cent for critique or criticism. (The summary comes before the critique; otherwise, the critique would not make sense.) Note that I have shortened the body of the critique.
- The review is written for people who have not read the original article. Note the clarity of expression and the short sentences.
- Note that not all of the criticism is unfavourable. Some of the responses are generally positive, suggesting that Ryckmans' point(s) needs to be refined.
- Note that the language used is forceful and direct. There is no vagueness or uncertainty in what the author wants to argue.
- *Surnames* are used for reference identification, *not given names.*
- Notice the use of critical language and the directness of the point of view being expressed by the writer (underlined).

NOTE:

I have written 'summary' and 'critique' to show where the different parts of the review occur, though these headings would NOT normally appear in the final version.

Summary

One of Ryckmans' main claims is that: 'Asia does not exist' (Ryckmans, 1994, p. 12). His point here is not, of course, that no Asian countries exist, but that the idea of 'Asia'—the academic concept—can be distinguished from Asian countries. He claims that *this* sense of 'Asia' does not exist. He argues this point by claiming that 'Asia' is a term which is incoherent. He states that using this term is actually a logical mistake in a similar way to category mistakes being errors. 'Asia' is a notion that is used to explain what is 'not western' he argues. This amounts to a negative definition, he claims, and is purely a western conception. However, this definition does not make much sense. There is little that is common about countries such as Thailand, Singapore and Burma, so the word 'Asia' makes little coherent sense, according to Ryckmans.

Following from this argument, Ryckmans suggests that the whole enterprise of Asian Studies as an academic discipline is flawed. This is because the subject depends on the acceptance of a coherent concept of 'Asia' but, according to Ryckmans, there is no such concept—it is merely a function of what he terms our 'imperialist-colonial era'. … …. (summary continues)

Critique

Some questions can be raised about Ryckmans' argument here, and also his definition of 'Asia'. One could argue that while he is right that Asian countries are not themselves *defined* by being understood 'negatively', this does not mean that the idea of 'Asia' 'has no meaningful content'. I don't agree with Ryckmans' point here. I think that other concepts which are 'negatively' defined are still meaningful. To take an example, the physicist's notion of 'space' was understood as 'a void' in the 18th and 19th centuries, yet this didn't make the *concept* of space devoid of content—on the contrary, it was and still is a very useful conceptual tool—without it Newton and his successors would not have gone very far. Similarly, it doesn't follow that just because a concept may be defined 'negatively' doesn't make it a useless concept—the concept of 'Asia' is certainly not useless. It is a concept which is used extensively in economics and geography and also in business and politics—with no obvious lack of coherence.

The other point I want to make is that it is oversimplifying the matter to say that the concept of 'Asia' is a purely Western notion. This seems to be a misleading claim. Surely, it is as much an Eastern concept as a Western one. As Westerners we do not define ourselves as all that is 'not-Eastern'! If we 'define' ourselves at all it would be in terms of specific cultural practices and habits, personality traits, and so on. This would be done by reference to other cultures to be sure, but not to the exclusion of them. So someone who had certain traits and adopted certain practices might be seen as 'Asian' only because most people who are like that live in what is called 'Asia'—but they need not be 'Asian' in many other ways. The practices of people themselves certainly help to define regional differences. Sometimes though, the distinction is not clear. Is a person of Asian appearance who cannot use chopsticks—only a knife and fork—'Asian' or 'Western'? Surely such a person would be 'both' to some degree or perhaps neither. Ryckmans' definition of 'Asia' seems unhelpful and irrelevant here. … … (critique continues)

NOTE:

Make sure that you are clear about the use of surnames. Bibliographies are always alphabetical by surname, so you must put the surname *first.* When you write literature reviews or essays, you always *refer* to people by their surname: 'Smith argues … '; "Jones claims … ", etc. This is always true, unless, of course, you are introducing them: 'Professor John Smith, Head of the Department of Engineering claims that … ' (afterwards, you just say: 'Smith').

4. Adding your 'voice' to your review

A common complaint that lecturers make of student work is that the student's **voice** is not clear. By this, lecturers mean that students fail to state their perspectives and opinions directly, and that they don't incorporate the ideas of others in ways that indicate **critical distance** and analysis. At the same time, some lecturers don't like the heavy-handed use of the word 'I' in texts *('I think … ', 'I will present … '*) and consider it excessive in academic writing and monotonous. So, how can you write in a way that makes your voice clear, and at the same time vary one's language in order to sound more critical?

Four suggestions for making your voice clear

1. Follow genre conventions

Follow genre conventions for assignments such as the essay, the literature review, the report and use the guidelines specified by your lecturer. In an argumentative essay, for example, you can do this by presenting your central argument and outlining your main supporting points in the introduction. (For genre conventions, see the sections of this book on the **essay, literature review, report** and **annotated bibliography**.)

2. Use appropriate connectives

The appropriate use of **connectives** (or 'transition signals') can help, as they act as signposts for the reader. Examples of connectives are words like 'first', 'second', 'third', 'for instance', 'similarly', 'moreover', 'not only … but also', 'in contrast' and so on. For other examples, see the exceptionally useful table by Oshima and Hogue (Oshima & Hogue, 1998, pp. 254–6) and the Manchester Phrasebank, especially the section on 'signalling transition' (University of Manchester, 2020).

3. Use a variety of reporting verbs and expressions

Reporting verbs provide a variety of terms and expressions you can use to introduce your positions and to refer to the ideas of others. Using this language will not only make your writing appear more critical; it will also help you to *become* more critical about texts. It is good to have variations when referring to ideas (beyond 'he states … '/'she states … '), and to use different language to support, attack, synthesize, question, summarize and contrast ideas. This variety and familiarity with the English language is what lecturers and supervisors want to see. A table of reporting verbs is provided below.

Author's surname The article He / she	*discusses* *examines* *explores* *investigates* *questions* *undermines* *refers to* *attacks* *supports* *presents* *dismisses*	noun phrase
	states *asserts* *argues* *maintains* *explains* *claims* *implies* *affirms* *assumes* *notes* *accepts* *acknowledges* *adds* *admits* *agrees* *concedes* *denies* *predicts*	that + clause

The reporting verbs listed above are all in the present simple tense, because the **present simple** tense is most often used when referring to the ideas of others. Writers generally use the present simple even when the information was published a very long time ago and the writers are dead. The *ideas* are still alive, that is, they are still being used or evaluated and are therefore still considered present. Using the past simple ('Smith presented' …) is not always wrong, however, and it is necessary for some action verbs (*discovered, realized*) and for references to experiments, surveys and other actions that took place *in the past.* When proofreading your work, always check you have used tenses correctly and consistently.

4. Critical review language

Critical review language places the writer in the centre of the debate. As you consider the critical review language presented below, pay close attention to the often subtle but

significant differences between terms. Be aware also that some of these examples will be considered inappropriate for some disciplines (e.g. social science and empirical science subjects tend to avoid expressions using the first person). You may need to consult written work in your own discipline to be sure which examples are acceptable.

The critical review expressions presented below are useful examples to help you write critical reviews and literature reviews. Unlike reporting verbs, they force you to state your own view on a topic or in response to an author you might be discussing. This provides a 'checklist' for you – so make sure that you have used *at least some* of the following terms in your own work. Make sure that you *vary* the examples in your own work – don't just use one or two. The following expressions are commonly used when reporting the ideas of others or expressing your own views on the idea of others.

NOTE:

where ›››››› appear, the variations given in the example above it can also be used. Square brackets […] indicate that words can be either used or omitted. Obliques (/) indicate that either alternative is acceptable.

Learning tip:

There are thousands of other variations used in critical review language. Consult academic textbooks to see and learn more. See, in particular, John Morley's **Academic Phrasebank** for a range of useful language (University of Manchester, 2020)

1. Stating your own position on a subject or topic

'I want to claim that … /show that … /demonstrate that … /highlight that …
' The aim of this paper is [to claim that]›››››››››››››››››››
'The point of this article is [to claim that] ›››››››››››››››››>
'I shall be claiming that … /showing that / demonstrating that / highlighting that..
'It shall be argued in this paper / review / thesis that …
'The view presented in this›››››››››››››››››››is that …
'The argument [advanced / put forward] in this›››››››››››is that …
'The point of view expressed / put forward in this›››››››››> is that …
'The conclusion I will be presenting is that …
'The perspective presented here is that …
' The point of view argued for here is that …

2. Stating the view of another person on a subject or topic

'Smith's argument is that …
'Smith's conclusion is that …
'Smith's point is that …

'Smith's point of view is that …
'According to Smith …
'From Smith's point of view …
'The point of Smith's article / paper is that …
'The substance of Smith's article / paper is that …
'The upshot of Smith's argument / paper / article is that …
'Smith's work / data allows him to draw the conclusion that …
'Smith's work / data leads him to the conclusion that …
'Some theorists, such as Smith (1989) think that …
'It is thought by some theorists, for example, Jones (1980) and Smith (1989) that … '

3. Attributing a view to another person (when you are not quite sure)

'Smith's claim seems to be that …
'Smith seems to be claiming that …
'Smith's argument seems to be that …
'Smith's conclusion seems to be that …
'The point of Smith's article seems to be that …

(Use any of the examples in (2) and add 'seems to'. **Exceptions:** This cannot be used for the examples: ' From Smith's point of view … ', 'According to Smith … ' and ' It is thought by some theorists … ')

4. Drawing a conclusion using the work of others

'The conclusion of [all] this is that …
'The result of [all] this is that …
'An outcome of this is that …
'An upshot of this is that …
'A consequence of this is that …
'When Smith's work is looked at closely, it is seen that …
'When Smith's argument is analysed, it can be seen that …
'Looking at Smith's work / argument [in detail] ⋙⋙⋙⋙⋙≫
'Analyzing Smith's data shows that …
'Developing Smith's work / argument to its logical conclusion shows that …
' ⋙⋙⋙⋙⋙⋙⋙⋙⋙⋙⋙⋙⋙it can be seen / shown that …
'One possible consequence of Smith's work is [that] …
'From Smith's work it can be determined that …
'One outcome of Smith's work is [that] …
'The following point can be brought out of Smith's work …
'The following argument can be brought out of Smith's work …
'Using Smith's work, it is possible to show that … /argue that …
'Using the work of Smith (1980) and Jones (1989), it can be shown that … /argued that …

5. Disagreeing with the views of others

'I do not agree [with Smith] that …
'I will argue / shall be arguing against Smith's view that …
'My argument against Smith is that …
'My disagreement with Smith is that …
'Unlike Smith, I want to suggest / claim / argue / propose …
'Against Smith, I will / shall be claiming / arguing / presenting the view that …
'Contrary to the views of Smith, I will / shall be / it will / shall⋙⋙⋙⋙⋙⋙>
'Smith's arguments do not seem to work for the reason that …
'In contrast to Smith's view / argument / data …
'The argument being advanced here is opposed to that of Smith …
'It does not seem to follow from Smith's work / data that …
'Smith's data / arguments are faulty for the reason that …
'Analyzing Smith's work in this way, it can be seen / one can see that …
'Problems arise in Smith's work [when it is seen that] …
'The point I am making / being made [here] is that Smith's argument / data / conclusion does not follow.

6. Agreeing with the views of others

'As Smith says …
'I agree with Smith's point [that] …
'This is also Smith's view …
'I will argue a similar view to that of Smith here.
'Here I am following the work of Smith in respect of / relation to …
'Following from Smith's point …
'I agree with Smith in so far as …
'Not unlike Smith (1980), I am suggesting / proposing / arguing …
'I agree with Smith in respect of his point [that] …
'Along the lines of Smith (1980), I am suggesting / claiming / arguing / putting forward …
'The view I am putting forward here is largely in agreement with [that of] Smith.
'The argument being put forward / espoused here is similar to that of Smith (1980).
'In this matter, I am [largely] in agreement with Smith (1980) in respect of / relation to …

7. Pointing out assumptions

'This assumes that …
'Smith assumes that …
'Smith's assumption is that …
'Assuming … [then] it follows that …
'The following assumption is being made here …
'One / An assumption of this view is that …

'The point being assumed here is that …
'The assumption on which this depends is …
'The assumption behind this view is [the point that] …
'Smith's argument depends on the assumption / assumes one thing: …

5. Annotated bibliographies

An **annotated bibliography** is similar to a critical review but far less detailed. In fact, an annotated review is usually only a summary (a **descriptive annotation**) but can sometimes contain a very brief critical one- or two-line evaluative comment, plus a reflective comment about how you might use the article in your research (this is called an **analytical annotation**). A single annotated bibliography entry is written in the present tense and does not normally exceed 150–250 words.

The aim of an annotated bibliography is to provide more than simply a list of sources. It is to write something summarizing the main point of each source. An annotated bibliography is therefore different from a critical review in that it provides a much shorter summary of a number of sources, sometimes dozens of articles. Think of an annotated bibliography as being a form of writing that is-between a critical review (of one article) and a literature review (of many articles). (See **Chapter 15, Writing a literature review**.)

Annotated bibliography entries have distinct stages as follows:

1 Citation
2 *Purpose:* short statement indicating the writer's purpose or aim
3 *Summary:* a summary of the main ideas in the paper
4 *Evaluation:* a series of statements that assess the ideas in the paper
5 *Reflection:* a comment on the extent to which the paper is useful or otherwise for the reader and their own work.

An example is provided below (note that the made-up citation is in APA format with a hanging indentation):

(1) Trevor, C. O., Lansford, B., & Black, J. W. (2014). Employee turnover and job performance: Monitoring the influences of salary growth and promotion. *Journal of Armchair Psychology*, *113*(1), 56-64. https://doi.org/xxxx

(2) In this article, Trevor et al. review the influences of pay and job opportunities in respect to job performance, turnover rates and employee motivation. **(3)** The authors use data gained through organizational surveys of blue-chip companies in Vancouver, Canada, to try to identify the main causes of employee turnover and whether it is linked to salary growth. Their research focuses on assessing a range of pay structures such as pay for performance and organizational reward schemes. **(4)** The article is useful to my research topic, as Trevor et al. suggest that there are numerous reasons for employee turnover and variances

in employee motivation and performance. The main limitation of the article is that the survey sample was restricted to mid-level management; thus, the authors indicate that further, more extensive, research needs to be undertaken to develop a more in-depth understanding of employee turnover and job performance. **(5)** This article will not form the basis of my research; however, it will be useful supplementary information for my research on pay structures.

6. Summary

This chapter has outlined how to write critical reviews and annotated bibliographies, two of the common forms of assessment given to postgraduate students in university. Critical reviews and annotated bibliographies are not easy to write. They demand careful thinking and consideration. Each word is decided upon very carefully. The aim is clarity and succinctness as well as critical acuity. It is very important to have some simple points that you have thought about yourself in response to the article you are reviewing. Always remember that, as a postgraduate, originality in ideas will be a key determinant of your grade. Make sure to use a variety of language forms to show your thinking as well.

Appendix: A Template for Critical Analysis

(Based on Wallace & Wray, 2020)

Text (citation details in correct referencing style, e.g. APA7, Harvard, MLA)

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1 Why is this article of interest to me?

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2 What is the aim or purpose of the authors in writing the article?

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3 What research gap does the article identify?

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4 How, if at all, does the article *advance scholarship* in the area?

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5 What are the main claims in the article and how do they relate to my work?

---

6 To what extent are the authors' claims convincing?

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7 What *evidence* is advanced by the authors to support their claims?

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8 What *arguments* are used by the authors in support of their claims?

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9 What methodology (if applicable) is used by the authors in arriving at their evidence for their claims?

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10 What *positive* points can be made in response to the article?

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11 What *negative* points can be made in response to the article (i.e. critical comments)?

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12 On balance, what do I think of the article?
