

Writing a Critical Review

Writing a critical review – of a book, article, or some other piece of writing – requires that you adopt an evaluative stance toward the piece. In a review you determine not simply what subject the piece addresses and how it does so, but how well the author achieves his or her purpose. You comment on the effectiveness of the author’s approach to the subject.

The Summary

In order to write about the strengths and weaknesses of a book or article, it’s important to describe the basic features of the piece in a summary. Your summary will usually be brief – significantly shorter than your analysis – and it will often follow the introduction. In this overview, you’ll provide a sense of the work’s purpose: is the author writing to inform the reader about the subject or to persuade him or her to agree with a particular position? What is the work’s thesis or central point? What key areas of interest or importance does it cover? What supporting arguments does it make? In what context was it written?

The Analysis

After your summary, you’ll present your critical analysis of the book or article. In order to assess the piece, you’ll need to be clear about your criteria for evaluation. Two common broad categories are points of agreement/disagreement and strengths/weaknesses. You may choose one or the other approach or use a combination of the two.

Points of Agreement / Disagreement

If you take this approach, you’ll engage directly with the content of the book or article and likely with the author’s arguments. **You’ll indicate the points with which you agree or disagree and give reasons why you support or challenge the author’s perspective.**

Strengths / Weaknesses

In this approach, you may engage less directly with the subject of the book or article and comment more on how the author presents the material. Here are several criteria you can use to determine a work’s strengths and weaknesses:

Scope: Are all important areas of the subject covered? What might be missing? Does the author use a suitable timeframe or geographical location to explore his or her subject? Is the size and nature of the population studied appropriate?

Logic: Are the author’s arguments logical? Do they make sense? Are the points illustrated with relevant and useful examples? Does the author avoid unsupported claims or generalizations? Does he or she draw reasonable or useful conclusions?

Evidence: What kind of evidence does the author provide? Given the purpose of the piece and its audience, is the evidence from suitable sources? Is it from scholarly or general sources, and are the sources primary or secondary ones? Are the sources current enough for the topic? Is

the data qualitative or quantitative? Is it appropriate to the subject and sufficient to inform and persuade the reader? Does the author appeal to appropriate experts in the field?

Objectivity: Does the author present both sides of a controversial issue and include various perspectives, if necessary, or is there a lack of fair-mindedness in the piece? Does the author acknowledge the limits of his or her approach to the subject?

Organization: Is the book or article constructed in a clearly discernable, logical way or is it confusing, repetitive, etc.? How might the parts have been ordered more effectively?

Style: Is the book or article at the appropriate level of formality or informality? Does the author use diction that is clear and understandable to the audience? Is the tone appropriate to the piece: somewhat distant and objective, friendly and conversational, or other?

General value: How useful is this book or article to its field? Does it offer a unique perspective or approach? Is it a helpful source of information or insight into the subject?

Organizing the Review

Thesis Development

Your thesis should be based, not on the author's perspective or approach to a subject, but on your observations arising from your analysis. Your thesis statement will focus on the primary points of agreement/disagreement or strengths/ weaknesses you will discuss in the body of your review. For example, you could write a thesis statement such as this: "Although the historical scope of Andersen's book is too limited, her investigation into racial profiling is important because she presents a particularly Canadian perspective and includes the viewpoints of several important groups without and within the justice system."

Body Paragraphs

Instead of examining a book or article section by section in a chronological approach (which can lead to too much summarizing), use your thesis statement to guide the organization of your analysis. Each paragraph in the body should focus on one strength or weakness, one point of agreement or disagreement, in the order laid out in the thesis statement.

Instead of a summarizing topic sentence such as "In chapter three, Andersen turns her attention to the reasons why racial profiling persists in law enforcement," each paragraph should begin by introducing a critical point: "A strength of Andersen's book is her ability to acknowledge various perspectives as she explores the causes of racial profiling. For example, she offers an overview based specifically on the Canadian experience." Your assessment of the book or article should be at the forefront of your review throughout.