

Writing Critical Responses to Texts

No strict rules apply when it comes to writing critical reviews of text, but there are certain conventions and expectations that your reader will be looking for. In general, you should include the following information in the first paragraph:

- Name of the writer
- Name of the article, book, etc.
- A general summary of the ideas presented in the writing
- A narrowing statement that takes a critical position and focuses on the main ideas you will be emphasizing

Remember: a critical position can be positive, negative, or both. It is not unusual for a writer to emphasize the strengths of a work while moving toward a position that suggests a critique of its limitations, or a focus on a particular idea that the writer wants to discuss further. The point of an opening paragraph such as this is to provide a context for the reader, to situate them, and to familiarize them with your critical position.

Remember to keep the focus of the paper on the critical position that you state in the introduction. Develop it further and provide examples and details that support your critique. If you use the voice of “I”, it should be a discursive I, one that reflects your personal research into the topic.

The following is a list of questions that you might ask yourself when you are asked to write a critical review of an article, a book report, or a critical summary.

WHAT IS THE WRITER’S POSITION?

- Is the writer inclined to hold a view regardless of evidence opposing that view? In other words, is the writer’s stance somewhat prejudiced?
- Does the writer admit any prejudices or limitations in the work, or are they left unexamined? Often the writer will address their own limitations, only to dismiss them as unimportant. Are they?
- Is the writer’s viewpoint consistent? If it isn’t, have they acknowledged this inconsistency in their work?
- How does the writer appeal to her audience? How do they use reason? Does the writer rely on logic, emotion, or is it an ethical appeal? Is this form of appeal appropriate, given the subject matter? Does it work?
- Is the argument cohesive and coherent?
- Are the connections logical and clear?

HOW DOES THE WRITER SUPPORT THIS POSITION?

- Is the argument based on accurate information?
- What sources does the writer use? Are they academic or scholarly sources? Is this important?
- Are the sources outdated or irrelevant?
- Are they presented accurately?

HOW DOES THE WRITER ADDRESS OPPOSING VIEWPOINTS?

- Does the writer even mention opposing views? (This could be a weakness in itself.)
- If so, what views does the writer oppose? How?
- Are these opposing views granted any validity? Does the writer report these views accurately and fairly? Do they explain why these views are inadequate or weak? Do they explain why one viewpoint is more appropriate than another?

WHAT FORM DOES THE WRITING TAKE?

- Does the structure or style reflect the content?
- Is the writing structurally coherent and organized? Are the chapters or subsections in the appropriate order?
- If there is a visual component, are the images easily accessible? Are they appropriate images? Do the images enhance the text?
- Does the writer use an appropriate voice? Is it ironic, solemn, academic, tongue-in-cheek?
- How does the writer conclude the argument?
- If the argument being made is a valid one, has the writer taken into account its future implications?
- If the research or ideas being explored are inconclusive, has the writer taken this into account?
- What still remains to be explained? How could further research enhance the study?
- Has the writer presented any explanations or solutions? Are they appropriate?

Cornell University provides web pages on [Critically Analyzing Information](#) and on [Evaluating Web Sites: Criteria and Tools](#) that you also might find useful.

Critically Analyzing Information: <http://www.library.cornell.edu/okuref/research/skill26.htm>

Evaluating Web Sites: Criteria and Tools: <http://www.library.cornell.edu/olinuris/ref/research/webeval.html>