

Writing Critical Responses to Lectures

In some assignments, you may be asked to write a critical response to or summary of a lecture. Your particular assignment sheet will have specific information about what you need to address or include in your response, but there are certain conventions and guidelines that can help in any of these types of assignments.

Remember: a critical position can be positive, negative, or both. It is not unusual for a writer to emphasize the strengths of a lecture while also pointing out its limitations or a topic that you think requires further development. Alternately, you can emphasize the weakness of a lecture in terms of its organization or style while still highlighting the interesting nature of the topic. Your primary purpose should be to tell your reader WHY you argue the critical position that you do and HOW you support that position through specific examples from the lecture.

THE INTRODUCTION

In general, you should include the following information in your first paragraph:

- Name of the speaker
- Name of the lecture, place and date
- A general summary of the ideas presented in the lecture or reading: be careful here not to provide too much detail; you only need address the top-level ideas, not every supporting idea or example that the speaker mentions.
- A narrowing statement that takes a critical position and identifies the main ideas or themes you will focus on. 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 the position you are taking in response to the lecture. You might try to answer the basic journalistic questions—who, what, where, when, why, and how—as you write this section.

DEVELOPING A 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.

A lecture has three major aspects that you might consider when writing your response: form, content and audience engagement. Please note: the following questions and considerations are meant to provide you with a starting point in developing your critical position: be a starting point. Some may not be relevant to your particular assignment.

1. FORM

What form does the presentation take? Does the structure, organization, and/or style reflect the content? Does the speaker interact with the audience through questions, jokes, comments, or does she lecture without referencing the audience?

- How does the speaker present himself initially? Does he speak from the podium, walk across the stage with a microphone, sit in a chair, speak as part of group?
- Does the speaker provide an overview of the lecture beforehand? Do they provide a summary of their talk, its basic direction and focus, or does this unfold as the talk progresses? When the talk is finished, are you able to come away from it with a clear idea of what it was about, and what the speaker's position was?
- Does the speaker use technology to deliver information? If so, how does that affect the overall experience? Do they choose to speak without a mike?
- Does the speaker's style of presentation match the topic? For example, does an interactive dialogue with the audience work well to reflect the ideas being presented? Does the use of advanced technology overwhelm the listener/viewer or does it enhance the delivery?
- Do you feel you are being "lectured" to? Is the delivery too didactic? Is it too informal? If so, is this effective, given the topic? Is the delivery clear, and well organized? Has the speaker considered the academic level of their audience? If they seem to be addressing a more (or less) educated audience, is that problematic? If so, why?
- If there is a visual component, are the images well -presented? Are they appropriate? Do they enhance or detract from the lecture or talk? The same questions can be asked of video, music, performance, etc.

Occasionally, an artist will present their work in a narrative, chronological format. In order for the talk to be strong and engaging, there usually has to be a discussion of ideas, concepts, or theories that inform their work. Does the speaker convey these ideas well (and clearly) in relation to the work being presented, or do they simply fall back on the work to "speak for itself." The opposite can happen as well. An artist or speaker can get so caught up in the conceptual ideas, in theoretical jargon, that they can't convey what they mean through examples that resonate with the audience. If you can, take note of when you think it would have proved useful to have further details and examples, or more conceptual background.

2. CONTENT

A good lecture or talk, like good writing, must include examples of key ideas. The speaker should remind the audience of their position, develop it, and support it with evidence. It may seem strange to think of an artist having a point of view or position in relation to their own work, but most do, and most should be able to express it.

- Does the speaker effectively convey the ideas, concepts or theories that inform their work (as an artist, writer, etc.), or do they simply fall back on the work to “speak for itself”? Do they provide examples to support their points that resonate with the audience? Do they adequately explain any technical language or ‘jargon’ that they use?
- Does the content of the lecture relate to class discussions or assigned readings? Can you connect it to other things you have read/seen/heard on this topic? Does it relate to the assigned weekly reading?
- If the lecture does relate to the reading, does the lecturer explain the importance of the weekly reading up front: is it discussed thoroughly in the context of the larger lecture? Is the lecture itself about the reading? If they’ve chosen to analyze the weekly reading, do you come away with a clear idea of their position?
- How does the speaker support her arguments? What secondary sources does the speaker use? Is their position or argument based on accurate and current information and sources?
- How does the speaker deal with opposing viewpoints? Does he mention them at all? If so, does he do so in a balanced way or is there evidence of bias?
- How does the speaker conclude their presentation? What still remains to be explained?
- If the research or ideas being explored are inconclusive, does the speaker take this into account? If s/he is primarily presenting their work, do they revisit their “failures” or look toward new possibilities?
- If the speaker is presenting their work or ideas as problematic, do they conclude by providing any explanations or solutions?

3. AUDIENCE ENGAGEMENT

- How does the speaker appeal to his/her audience? Does the writer use an appropriate voice? Do you feel engaged?
- Is the delivery clear and well organized?
- Has the speaker considered the academic level of his/her audience? If he seems to be addressing a more (or less) educated audience, is that problematic? If so, why?
- Is the argument compelling? Do you find yourself agreeing or disagreeing with the speaker? Why?
- Does the writer use an appropriate voice? Is it ironic, solemn, academic, tongue-in-cheek? Do you feel engaged?
- Does the speaker read directly off of paper notes or a computer? Do they rely on notes? Are they able to speak off the top of their head?
- Do they answer questions clearly? Are they able to anticipate these questions?

EXAMPLES AND OTHER RESOURCES

Here are links to two recent reviews of lectures: [one](#) on architecture and the [other](#) on a recent lecture by Lev Manovich.

Lecture Review: Lebbeus Woods by Jimmy Stamp:

<http://lifewithoutbuildings.net/2006/09/lecture-review-lebbeus-woods.html>

Lecture by Lev Manovich:

<http://mastersofmedia.hum.uva.nl/2009/05/26/lev-manovich-cultural-analytics-lecture-at-paradiso/>