

Critical Reading and Critique

In graduate school, and indeed, in the workplace, you will often be called up on to respond critically to source materials. Critical reading requires the abilities to both summarize and evaluate a presentation of information (article, book, report, speech or other performance etc). In academic writing, you will use critique in research papers to critique sources to establish their usefulness, in position papers to stake out your own position by critiquing others, in book reviews to combine summary and critique, and in essay format exams, to demonstrate your understanding of course material by critiquing it. In workplace writing, you might use critique in legal briefs or other legal documents, in business plans and proposals to critique less cost effective, efficient, or reasonable approaches, or in policy briefs to communicate the failings or policies or legislation through critique.

A summary is a brief restatement of the content of a passage in your own words; however, an evaluation is a more difficult and ambitious undertaking. There is no ready-made formula for determining the validity of a given piece of information. Critical reading, and its written component—the critique—require discernment, sensitivity, imagination, knowledge of the subject, and a willingness to engage intellectually with what you read. These skills are developed, as all skills are, through practice. But you have to start somewhere, so let's begin with posing two broad questions to frame your critique: **1) To what extent does the author succeed in his or her purpose? 2) To what extent do you agree with the author?**

Handling Question 1:

Before attempting an evaluation, you must be able to locate an author's thesis and identify the writing's content and structure. You must understand the author's purpose. Authors write to entertain, inform, or persuade. Often these purposes are blended.

Writing to Inform

Writing that is intended to inform will provide definitions, describe or report on a process, recount a story, give historical background, and/or provide facts and figures.

Having determined this purpose, you can organize your critical response by considering: 1) accuracy of the information, 2) significance of the information, 3) fair interpretation of the information.

Writing to Persuade

Writing that is intended to influence the reader's thinking. To make a persuasive case, the writer must begin with an assertion that is arguable, some statement with which reasonable people might disagree. Such an assertion, when it serves as the essential organizing principle of the article or book, is called a thesis.

Having determined this purpose, you can critique the validity of the argument by considering: 1) clearly defined key terms, 2) used information fairly and accurately, 3) argued logically without resorting to fallacious reasoning.

Writing to Entertain

Writing to entertain does not always mean making people laugh. A good book may prompt a reader to reflect, become elated, get angry, or have many other reactions. However, like a response to informative or persuasive writing, your response to entertaining writing should be precisely stated and carefully developed.

Having determined this purpose, you can critique this form of writing by asking a series of questions: 1) Did I care for the portrayal of a certain character? 2) Did the characters seem overly sentimental? Vicious? Heroic? Something else? 3) Were the situations believable? 4) Was the action interesting or formulaic? 5) Did the sequence of events seem plausible?

Handling Question 2:

When you are formulating a critical response to a source, you must try to distinguish your evaluation of the author's purpose and success or failure at achieving that purpose from your own agreement or disagreement with the author's views. Making that distinction allows you to respond to a piece of work on its merits—not on your own prejudices and preferences. You must be an unbiased, even-handed critic, evaluating an author's clarity of presentation, use of evidence, and adherence to principles of logic in order to make your own argument about how well the author has succeeded in his or her purpose.

Identify Points of Agreement and Disagreement to Create Your Evaluation

Be precise in identifying where you agree and disagree with an author. You will find this easy to do if you organize your reaction into three parts: 1) Summarize the author's position, 2) State your own position, 3) Elaborate on your reasons for your position.

Note that your own position can be more nuanced than a simple "agree" or "disagree." For example, you might agree with the author's position, but feel that he has expressed his point of view poorly because he chose ineffective evidence. In all cases, your critique will reflect your assessment both of the author's thesis and how well he or she has supported it.

Evaluate Assumptions

One way to elaborate on your reaction to a piece of work is to explore the underlying reasons for your agreement or disagreement. Your reactions are based largely on assumptions that you hold and how those assumptions compare with the author's. An assumption (which is also called "warrant") is a fundamental statement about the world and its operations that you take to be true. A writer's assumptions might be explicitly stated; but just as often, assumptions are implicit and you can only infer them.

When you find an author's assumptions invalid—that is, not supported by factual evidence—or if you disagree with the values-based assumptions underlying the author's position, you may well disagree with the conclusions that follow from these assumptions. Alternatively, if you find that your own assumptions are contradicted by actual experience, or convincing evidence, you may be forced to conclude that your premises were mistaken, and you may want to change your position.

Guidelines for Writing a Critique

Introduce: Introduce both the writing under analysis and the author

Summarize: Summarize the author's main points, making sure to state the author's purpose for writing.

Assess Presentation: Evaluate the validity of the author's presentation as distinct from your points of agreement or disagreement. Comment on the author's success in achieving his or her purpose by reviewing three to four specific points.

Respond to the Presentation: Now it is your turn to respond to the author's views. With which views do you agree? Disagree? Discuss your reasons for agreement and disagreement, when possible tying these reasons to assumptions—both the author's and your own.

Conclude: State your conclusions about the overall validity of the piece—your assessment of the author's success at achieving his or her aims and your reaction to the author's views. Remind the reader of the weaknesses and strengths of the passage.