

# The Critical Analysis

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You may be asked to write a critical analysis (also called a critique or critical review) of one or more books or articles in your discipline of study. In this analysis, you are not only summarizing the contents of the book or article, but also commenting, interpreting, and evaluating. Your instructor will probably be looking for evidence that you understand the research methods or scholarly procedures of the discipline, and can apply your understanding to this specific piece.

Plan your analysis according to the instructions you have received. In the absence of specific instructions, here is a general plan to follow:

1. In your **introduction**, give the author and title of the book or article, together with other relevant factual information. Provide a context for the reader, perhaps by relating this book or article to a larger body of work (often such information is contained in the introductory section of the book or article itself). Use this background to lead up to your thesis statement about the overall significance or value of the book or article.
2. Then **summarize** the content of the work under review. If you are writing about a full-length work, you may choose to emphasize the aspects of the work relevant to your assignment. The introductory and concluding sections of the work will be particularly helpful in seeing the work as a whole. Be sure also that you understand and can explain the method or principle by which the author proceeds in the body of the work.

As you write this section, establish an imaginary framework in which *you* are writing about other writers. Make clear verbal distinctions between their statements and your own. For example, preface a statement about their conclusions with a phrase like "The researchers concluded that . . ." Your reader will assume that any statement not introduced in such a way is your own original comment.

Be particularly careful if the work is a review article rather than a primary report of research. In that case, you are writing about a writer who, in turn, is synthesizing the work of other writers. The source of every idea or fact must be made clear: does it come from the author of the article, or the authors of the original research? Remember that your instructor will expect you to comment both on the article you are reviewing, and on the research on which it is based.

3. Finally, **evaluate** the book or article critically, in terms of the standards for research and writing in the field. You should know what to look for in a good argument or a good scientific study, and identify those elements (or their absence) in the piece under review. If you are applying your understanding of scientific method to your reading, you may wish to deal with the components of the scientific method in logical order (the question, the methodology, the interpretation of the data, the conclusions). Note, however, that

while formal scientific articles follow this order, less formal ones may not. Therefore you should not necessarily deal with the material in the order in which it appears in the original article.

4. Alternatively, here are some general questions you may answer:

- \* What relevant qualifications or background does the author have?
- \* What is the author's thesis or main point?
- \* What kind of supporting evidence is used (for example, statistics, anecdote, or expert opinion)?
- \* Does the work take a particular approach to the subject (for example, a behaviorist approach in a psychological article)?
- \* Have assumptions been made? Are they questionable?
- \* Have opposing theories or points of view been considered? Has all the relevant evidence been taken into account?
- \* Does the author's conclusion follow logically from the evidence?
- \* What contribution does the work make? Why is it worth reading?

5. When you have finished writing, check your organization and language again.

- \* Have you given enough support to the general assessment of the work which appears in your thesis? Remember that you are not expressing a personal opinion about the work, but rather weighing its strengths and weaknesses as a professional would.
- \* Is your tone objective and unbiased? Will the reader immediately know which statements are your own, and which are paraphrased? Are all quotations clearly indicated, and have you checked their accuracy?
- \* Is all quoted or paraphrased material accurately documented, in the documentation style specified by the instructor?