

Writing a critical review

What is a critical review?

A critical review is a critical evaluation of a document (or book or chapter or article). It is not just a summary of the contents. You are expected to read, make judgments about the document and justify these judgments by using the criteria given to you by your lecturer or indicated in the theory.

If you have been given criteria to undertake the review in your assessment task (or in the marking criteria), use those criteria to formulate questions.

How do I write a critical review?

Before you can critically review something, you need to understand what you are reviewing. Prepare yourself for reading the document by:

- formulating some questions to answer (see suggestions below).
- researching some related literature so you can make comparisons between the assessment document and the relevant literature.

Then read the document carefully, questioning as you read. Make notes as you read but reserve judgment until you have finished the article.

Questions to ask yourself

- What is the author's purpose? Make a short statement in one or two sentences about the author's purpose. If you cannot do this, it might mean that you have not read the article carefully enough or it might mean that the author's purpose is not clear or well developed.
- How has the author developed his/her thesis and ideas? Are there paragraphs to support (or not support) the author's purpose? Are there any unclear ideas?
- Are the ideas supported (or not supported) by other research? Is the evidence relevant, reliable and recent?
- Is there a particular focus/bias? If so, is this because of the author's purpose, or because assumptions have been made, or because a particular perspective has been taken? Is this a limitation?
- What is your overall evaluation? That is, what is the document's worth or value? Does the author achieve his/her purpose?
- What are the particular strengths and weaknesses of the document in the way the information is presented, in the way the argument has been structured and/or in the evidence used?
- How does the document contribute to knowledge in this field and to your understanding of this knowledge?

Writing the critique

- Construct an introduction that:
 - specifically identifies the document at the beginning of the review i.e. include the bibliographic reference details (author, date, title, publisher)
 - states your overall evaluation of the document (thesis) based on your critical analysis.
- Construct a body that:
 - justifies your evaluation
 - identifies and substantiates the strengths/weaknesses of various aspects of the document
 - identifies and explains the criteria used in your evaluation
 - states how the document has contributed to the related field of knowledge
 - states how the document has contributed to your understanding of the topic.
- Construct a *conclusion* that restates your overall judgement together with an overview of the reasons for that decision.
 - Construct your list of references. Ensure you list all references cited in the review.

If the document you have reviewed is not readily available, it is a good idea to include a copy as an appendix. Check the assessment guidelines to ensure that you have done what is required.

Example paragraph from a critical review of an article:

The findings by Renk et al. (2003) are consistent with those of other researchers but also differ on some points. For example, the finding by Renk et al. (2003) that mothers predominantly take responsibility for child-related tasks is consistent with a large body of related research (e.g., Baxter, 2002; Craig, 2003; McBride & Mills, 1993, as cited in Renk et al., 2003; Sanderson & Thompson, 2002; Yeung, 2001). In contrast, there is little support for the finding by Renk et al. (2003) that there is no significant difference in either direct interaction or accessibility by mothers and fathers. In fact, other research data indicates that mothers spend significantly more time than fathers interacting with and being accessible to their children (e.g., Baxter, 2002; Child Trends, 2002; Craig, 2003; Craig & Bittman, 2003; Silver, 2000; Yeung, 2001). Despite these differences, the findings from these studies are consistent with Renk et al.'s (2003) findings that the age of the child impacts on the time parents spend with their children which decreases as the child gets older. Overall, there is also supportive evidence for the original proposition put forward by Renk et al. that non-traditional gender roles and attitudes positively affect the amount of time fathers spent with their children (Hoffman & Moon, 1999; Sanderson & Thompson, 2002) but not their findings that there is no differences between men and women in terms of their direct interaction with or access to children.

Take note of:

- How the writer has used other literature to make judgments about the content of Renk et al.'s article.
- How paragraph structure is used to:
 - make a judgment about the content of the article
 - give examples to support that judgment
 - draw a conclusion about the content.

Check the *SCU Learning Zone* for more related Quick Guides.