Writing a Critique/Critical Review

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What is a Critique?
A critique or critical review is a form of essay that summarises and evaluates a book, a chapter of a book or an article. It is a written exercise in critical thinking.

Requires the reader to:
- Question the information and opinions presented in the text
- Provide an informed and supported opinion on:
  - the strengths and weaknesses of the text
  - the contribution of the text to the field

What does a critique do?
- Identifies what the author is saying
- Identifies how points are being made
- Identifies the assumptions being made
- Evaluates the ideas developed, based on:
  - current theory and research
  - knowledge of the conventions of the particular kind of text being reviewed

What kind of text are you critiquing?

Example:
- Academic essay
- Research report
- Review of research
- Academic book
- Policy document
- Newspaper article

Understand conventions and expectations to know what you should be looking for
Always check specifications in your course guide

This presentation

Part 1: General points on writing a critique
- What are the main parts of a critique?
- What are you looking for?

Part 2: Focus on research report
- What are the components?
- What are you looking for?

Part 1: Writing a Critique

Parts of a critique:
- Introduction
- Summary of the article
- Your analysis and evaluation
- Conclusion

Please note: The following are general guidelines only and may differ from what is required for your specific assignments. Make sure you check specific content and structural guidelines in your course guides.
### Introduction to your Critique

**Should include:**
- Brief background information about
  - The topic
  - The author
  - The article
- Your thesis statement/main idea
  - What is your main argument?
  - What are going to show in the critique?

### Background information on...

#### The Topic
- What is the general topic of the article/essay? See:
  - Title of article
  - Introduction
  - Abstract
- How does it fit into its field of study?
- What gave rise to the need for this article?

### The Author
- Where does the author work?
- What is the author’s research area?
- How does this article fit into the author’s research area?
- What is the author’s research history?
- Does the author have any political agenda?

**Where do I find this information?**
1. Somewhere in the publication itself
2. Use a Google search to find the author

### The Article
- What is the purpose of the article?
- When was it written?
- What theoretical framework is used?
- Who is the intended audience?
  - may be revealed by publication in which article appears
- What sources does the author use?
  - Look at Reference List or check footnotes or endnotes
  - Eg. Primary research; case studies

### Introducing your critique

#### Your Thesis Statement
- A brief statement summarising your evaluation of the text
- Evaluation is often a mixed response – both positive and negative

**Example:**

Although Madison’s article demonstrates the potential advantages of banning the use of cell phones in schools, his argument provides little compelling evidence that this will address the specific problem of cyber bullying.

### Example 1:


Using Hofstede’s (1980, 1983 and 1991) and Hofstede and Bond’s (1988) five cultural dimensions, Goodwin et al. (2000) conducted a study on the influence of culture on ethical decision making between two groups of accountants from Australia and Singapore. This research aimed to provide further evidence on the effect of cultural differences since results from previous research have been equivocal. The study reveals that accountants from the two countries responded differently to ethical dilemmas in particular when the responses were measured using two of the five cultural dimensions. The result agreed with the prediction since considerable differences existed between these two dimensions in Australians and Singaporeans (Hofstede 1980, 1991). However the results of the other dimensions provided less clear relationships as the two cultural groups differed only slightly on the dimensions. To the extent that this research is exploratory, results of this study provide insights into the importance of recognising cultural differences for firms and companies that operate in international settings. However several limitations must be considered in interpreting the study findings.

(Adapted from Mort, Hallion, & Downey, 2005)
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### Example 2: A critique of a review of previous research


In this seminal study, Cotton et al. reviewed previous research on the effect of participative decision making (PDM) on the performance and job satisfaction of individual employees. Arguing that previous attempts to evaluate the effectiveness of PDM in organizations had been clouded by assumptions of PDM as a unitary construct, their review set out to answer the question: Are different forms of PDM associated with different outcomes? In order to attempt to answer this question, Cotton et al. classified previous studies by form of PDM and analysed the outcomes for each form separately. They found that “different forms of PDM are associated with markedly different outcomes” and concluded that discrepancies in results among previous studies on PDM could be attributed to the form of PDM used in the studies. The article marked the beginning of a period of debate...This essay argues that this article contributed... However, a number of problems with...
Thesis

- Is there a clear argument or claim to the paper?
- Is this argument or claim developed logically through the text?
- Is the purpose of the article clearly defined in the Introduction?

Supporting ideas

- Are the supporting ideas convincing?
- Do they develop the main idea logically through the article/essay?
- Has the author developed all the supporting points mentioned in the introduction to the article?
  - is there anything that is left out/left unfinished?
  - are some points developed more fully than others?
- Is the author’s point of view objective and impartial?
  - also check the language used: Is it emotional?

Limitations

- What limitations has the author identified?
  e.g. time limit, sample size, depth of research, lack of ideas from other disciplines, if relevant
- Are the limitations clearly identified?
- Are there any unidentified limitations?
- Are the writer’s assumptions reasonable?

Evidence

- Is the evidence reliable? Check the sources used
- Is it detailed? Does it convince the reader?
- Is it sufficient to back up all the points being argued?
- What conclusions are drawn from the evidence?
  Are these conclusions justified?
- Are both sides of the argument presented and supported with reference to theory or research?

Presentation

- Has the material been organised in a logical fashion?
  - Eg. chronological/time order where appropriate
  - Does the order reflect the organisation of the thesis statement?
- Is the article coherent, so that ideas are clearly connected?
  - connecting material between sentences & paragraphs
  - can you follow the author’s train of thought easily? OR
  - does the author jump from point to point without clear signals to the reader?

See my notes on Writing Paragraphs & Sentences

Suitability for intended audience

- Level of difficulty
  - conceptual density
  - technical level
- Does the writer define technical terms for the reader where appropriate?
- Are there any culturally specific references?
  Is it aimed at a particular cultural group?

Example: What would we ask about this article?
**Implications in the field**

- Which gaps in the knowledge on a topic does the article fill?
- Does the article increase the bank of knowledge for academics in a particular discipline? For practitioners in a particular field?
  - theory, data and/or practical application
- Does the article point to areas in which more research is needed?
- Can people improve their lives by using the information in the article? How?

**Your evaluation and analysis**

Remember: You are providing a response to the article

- Do not simply summarise the article. Respond to it.
- Explain why you are responding in a certain way
  - support your response with your readings on the topic
  - support your response with your knowledge of the conventions of the type of writing you are critiquing
  - support your response with reference to research methodology issues where appropriate. Ask your lecturer to recommend a suitable text

See examples used in Part 2 of this presentation

**Concluding Your Critique**

- Restate your thesis/main idea
- Summarise the main points you have made in your critique
- Point out the implications and significance of the critique

**Part 2: Critiquing Research Reports**

- What are the components of a research report?
- What are you looking for in summarising and critiquing each component and the report as a whole?
- Extracts from a critique to illustrate points

Please note: The following are general guidelines only and may go beyond what is required for your specific assignments. Make sure you check specific content and structural guidelines in your course guides

**Research report**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Components</th>
<th>Articles generally include:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Abstract:</td>
<td>Brief summary highlighting reasons for study, methods and findings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction:</td>
<td>Brief review of theoretical background &amp; earlier research on topic; reasons for current research</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Method:</td>
<td>How research was conducted &amp; materials used</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Results:</td>
<td>Details on findings and statistical tests, with summaries of data in the form of charts/graphs/tables</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discussion:</td>
<td>Analysis, interpretations, implications of results</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion:</td>
<td>Summary of key findings, implications for the field and suggestions of future directions for further research</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Adapted from Lim, 2003)

**Introduction section**

**Often features:**

- **Background information – context of research**
  - why is the research area important?
  - statistics often used as evidence of importance
- **Brief review of the literature**
  - what has been studied previously on the topic?
  - how it has been studied?
  - what has been found?
  - how do the findings of different studies compare?
  - what are the limitations of these studies?
  - what are the gaps in existing knowledge on the topic?
- **Focus of current research**
  - which gap in existing knowledge will the study fill?
**Background information – context of research**

- Is there a clear research question/hypothesis?
  - Is there a clear purpose to the research?
- Is it clear why the general research area is important?
  - Eg: Which problem is the research addressing and what is the extent of the problem?
- Is it clear why the researcher has chosen to focus on the particular aspect of the problem examined in the study?
- Is it clear how the research will contribute to the field of study and to practitioners?

**Review of the literature**

- Is the review written critically? Does the writer show strengths and weaknesses, contributions and limitations of previous research?
- Does the writer refer to relevant research on the topic?
  - both current and classic?
- Are main concepts clearly defined and discussed? (See Pyrczack & Bruce, 2005, pp. 69-77).
- Is the review balanced? Does it present literature showing different perspectives on the topic?
- Is the literature reviewed taken from appropriate sources?
  - peer reviewed journals
  - academic books

**The literature review should lead logically to the research topic**

- Previous research on the topic
  - Theories
  - Studies
  - Reviews
- Comparison of findings
  - Areas of agreement
  - Areas of disagreement
- Contribution of the studies
  - Limitations of the studies
  - Gap(s) in the research
- How current study addresses gap(s)

**Method section**

**Research instruments**

- Are they described in enough detail?
  - If researchers have built their own instruments, these should be described in detail for the reader
  - If the researcher has used a published instrument, the article should briefly describe at least:
    - the traits it was designed to measure
    - its format
    - the possible range of score values
  - Information on reliability and validity, when available, should be provided for both published and unpublished instruments

(Pyrczack & Bruce, 2005)

**Participants**

- Ethical considerations and how they were addressed
  - description of informed consent procedures where appropriate (including parental consent for minors)
  - description of steps taken to maintain confidentiality
- Are the participants described in enough detail?
  - Eg: Gender, ethnicity, age, socio-economic status
  - Details should be relevant to the issues being studied
- If a sample of a population was studied, is the method of sampling described?

See Pyrczack and Bruce, 2005, Chapter 9 for other considerations and examples
Example from a critique by McMorrow, 2006

Description and evaluation of data collection

Vagueness and omissions can also be found in the methods and findings sections. Data was collected through “semi-structured” interviews with 63 Asian students at three Australian language schools – one affiliated to a university. No explanation is provided for this sampling, despite the fact that 10 of the students are permanent residents of Australia – hardly representative of the researcher’s purported context of ‘international education’.

The data was collected through ‘semi-structured’ interviews, both individual and ‘focus group’. There is no discussion of the rationale for or conduct of these interviews. Nor of the possibility – or as many argue, the certainty (G. Barkhuizen, personal communication, 31st October 2006) – of ‘co-construction’ of any narrative obtained in such circumstances.

Reference to theory

Discussion and conclusions

• How do the researchers interpret the results of the study?
• Do the conclusions drawn by the researchers seem reasonable?
• Why? Why not? If not, what are the problems? Provide possible alternative explanations for results.
• Are the limitations of the research described?
• Does the researcher point out whether the results of the study are consistent with the results and theories described in the literature review?
• Does the writer discuss possible implications of the results? (E.g. Actions that could be taken based on the results of the study)
• If the writer makes recommendations for further research on the topic, are these specific?
• Is it clear exactly what value the research adds to the field?

Results section

A few things to consider:

• Is the process used to analyse the data clearly described for the reader?
• Is it appropriate?
• Could the data be interpreted in another way?
  - do you agree with the researcher’s interpretation?
• Is there a possible alternative explanation for the results?
  - something the researcher has not taken into account eg. health of participants in a study of sleep patterns

Results section

• Do you agree with the writer’s interpretation of the data?

Possible contamination of data can also be inferred by frequent merging of data with its interpretation, as in, “According to Student C, the Australian teachers’ abuse of the interactive teaching approach hindered the process of learning and dampened student enthusiasm for the tasks at hand” (p. 5). How are we supposed to accept this as an expression of a student’s “narrative” when the anonymous ‘voice’ is drowned out by the researcher’s own terminology?

  - Quote from the text you’re critiquing where appropriate
  - Explain any criticism clearly. Why is it a problem?

Language Focus: Expressing Critique

Making positive comments

The author provides a number of insightful comments on...

The model developed by the author provides a valuable new perspective on the relationship between X and Y...

Not only has the author presented some valuable new insights into the problem, but she has presented these in a practical context which facilitates understanding across...

The author’s argument is very well supported with references to a number of cases which provide strong evidence of...

Google: Manchester University + Academic Phrasebank

for useful phrases for expressing critique
Language Focus: Expressing Critique

Saying what the author should have done but did not do

Some information on the historical background of the case would have been helpful.

This article would have been more convincing if the author had related his findings to previous work on the topic.

It would have been better if the authors had given their main findings in the form of the table.

The author should have provided a …

(Swales & Feak, 1994, p. 34)

Examples of reviews in an education journal:


References


