

Writing a CRITICAL ANALYSIS (Critique)

Academic Skills Center * Room 1501 * Shoreline Community College

To write an effective critique you must first be a critical reader. You must carefully analyze a writer's argument, perspective, and/or information presented to determine strengths and weaknesses. You must look at the work objectively, using certain criteria to evaluate it. Because a critique is also personal, it will also include your own opinions and reactions. You may find the following three-stage procedure helpful when writing a critique.

Stage I: Prepare

1. **Prepare to read.** First, consider the title of the article. Reflect on what it means to you. What do you already know about this topic? What do you believe? What do you predict the article will cover?
2. **Read the article actively.** As you read each paragraph, hold these key questions in your mind: What's the main idea in this paragraph (or section)? What facts or details support the ideas? How do the important ideas relate to each other? During this reading you may want to mark major points and make a few brief marginal notes to remind you of the content, but do not spend too much time yet in notetaking activities. Your main focus should be on reading for the key questions.
3. **Respond to the article subjectively.** Freewrite for five minutes. Record any feelings, reactions, or thoughts you have about the article. Does it interest you? Excite you? Is it disturbing or provoking? Does it remind you of anything/anyone?
4. **Respond objectively.** Write a brief summary of the article. Do not include any of your own ideas or opinions.

Stage II: Analyze

Before you begin writing your critique, you may want to read it again with several critical questions in mind:

- a. **Background:** What is the *nature* of the article? Who wrote it and what are her/his qualifications for writing it?
- b. **Purpose:** Why was the article written? What is its purpose? What are the objectives of the article? What kind of material is presented to achieve those objectives? What is the significance of the article? How does it relate to other materials on the same subject?
- c. **Thesis:** What is the writer's position? Is it stated directly and clearly? What are the writer's key *assumptions*? Are they explicit or implicit? Do you detect biases? Are the assumptions and biases obvious, or are they hidden behind a stance of neutrality and objectivity? (An assumption is a belief about something. It is often not stated by a writer. Assumptions underlie all human behavior. For example, when you go to your classroom, you assume your teacher will show up. You should critically examine all assumptions, even those in sync with your own.)
- d. **Evidence:** What does the writer provide to support her/his position? What are the writer's specific arguments? Is the evidence believable? Authoritative? Sufficient? Logical or emotional? Are you convinced?
- e. **Refutation:** Does the writer present her/his thesis as the only reasonable position? Or has the writer clearly and fairly presented any opposing sides? Has the writer shown the opposing arguments to be invalid? Has the writer overlooked any possible opposition?
- f. **Appeal:** What is the appeal of the article? What are some of its most striking or illuminating qualities? What, if any, are its striking deficiencies? What is the writer's style or tone? Authoritative? Speculative? Reasonable? Suggestive? What kind of language does the writer? Does it add to her/his credibility?

(Please continue on the back)

Stage III: Write the Critique

1. In your first paragraph state the subject of the article you are analyzing and its author. You might give some preliminary information about both. You may want to include the premise or main point of the article. Then write a statement that asserts *your* main point--your evaluation of the article--and shows the direction you will pursue in your discussion.
2. Next, summarize background facts, issues, etc. that must be understood before the article's point can be appreciated. Remember, you are illuminating the writing of another for *your* audience. What does your audience need to know about the article in order to understand your judgment of it?
3. Review the information (including the author's key assumptions) that must be understood before the position you plan to take on the article can be appreciated.
4. Summarize the author's argument or perspective. Do not add your opinion yet. Be objective. (NOTE: You may choose to reverse the order of steps 3 and 4.)
5. Review the author's argument in light of the position you identified in step 1 and further elaborated in step 3. Make sure that all points relate to your central thesis.
6. State your conclusions, reminding the reader of the points you've made and the reasons you have for making them. Remember, you have made judgments based upon a specific set of criteria you have discussed. What emerges from your analysis of the reading as a whole? Has your own thinking changed? What thoughts did it provoke? Did the article reinforce what you already knew or believed? Do you think differently about the world as a result of reading the article?

Writing Process Strategy

For the best writing product, follow these steps when writing your critique:

1. **Prewrite:** It's important before you begin writing a draft, to list ideas, mind map, brainstorm, freewrite, or do some kind of activity that lets your mind run loose with your thoughts. (If you have answered the questions in the "Analyze" section above, you will have many notes to help you get started.)
2. **Draft:** From your prewriting notes, consider the direction you want to take. What's your main idea (thesis)? How will you organize your points? Consider the steps in Stage III above and write a draft. DO NOT worry about perfect sentence structure, grammar, spelling, punctuation, etc. at this time! Just get your thoughts on paper.
3. **Revise:** It's useful to let some time pass between drafting and revising a paper. Your mind will incubate thoughts, and when you leave them alone for awhile and take a fresh look, you may think of new things or have a new perspective on what you've already written. What was a puzzle to you yesterday make be clearer today. When you revise your paper, you make sure that you have a clear thesis, that you have stayed focused on that idea with relevant details, and that you have ordered your ideas/analysis in a logical, interesting way. This is the time to make sure that the connections between sentences and paragraphs are clear. You should use transition words to make your connections clear.
4. **Edit/Proofread:** The final stage is for finesse. Check your spelling, punctuation, and sentence structure. Make sure you haven't left anything important out.

Information and strategies presented in this handout are taken from these sources: Writing, Reading, and Research, Third Edition, Veit/ Gould/Clifford, c. 1994, pp. 450-451; Writing and Reading Across the Curriculum, Behrens/Rosen, c. 1982, p. 41. These books are available in the Academic Skills Center, room 1501.