

## WRITING CRITIQUES

A critique is not simple a report or summary but a specialized short paper, usually written about a book, article, film, or perhaps a work of art. Its major function is to show your reactions to the work, and involves evaluation, value judgment, interpretation, and response. A critique may focus on an individual work or discuss a theme common to several.

Before writing a critique you should establish a list of criteria. The criteria may consist of a list of questions you plan to keep in mind while evaluating the work or a set of standards you will apply in judging it. The list may vary somewhat according to the nature of the work, your purpose in examining it, and any specific assignment that might accompany it. However, there are some general guidelines for establishing criteria.

A workable set of standards or questions usually includes some on the following: what the work has to say, the clarity with which it is said, and the value or significance of its message. The first requires your understanding of the work, second your judgment of its structure, and third your interpretation and response. Standards you may wish to consider include the accuracy of the work's facts and information, the logic of its argument, and the aesthetics of its design.

Other criteria might include the work's significance to the times (its own historical time or the contemporary scene), its effect on the community, perhaps even the values and ethics need not label all works supporting community values "good" and those challenging them "bad." History has often demonstrated the constructive value of the work that challenges or even denies the ethics current at the time of its conception. In any case, the nature of the assignment and your own standards will help in selecting criteria.

Before you write the critique you should examine and experience the work thoroughly. Your task here is to gather the material you will use in constructing the critique. You should make careful notes which will probably include a summary of the book's intent and how it is accomplished. Include your reactions and responses to the author's arguments and methods. Also note particular passages you may want to quote exactly, keeping careful records of the page numbers.

When you feel sufficiently acquainted with the work, you are ready to begin Prewriting." The following steps are often helpful in prewriting to write the final critique. First, write down in a sentence or two your general impression of the work—that is good or bad, useful or of little value, interesting, boring, stimulating, or whatever. Next, you should write down the details of that general judgment: specifically, what is good, bad, etc. about it. Then, you should jot down the specific things in the work leading to your general response.

At this point, consult your notes for key arguments, significant passages you may wish to quote, portions illustrating the author's point of view, or supporting your judgment of the work. Be sure to concentrate on what is important and deal only with significant aspects of the work.

When you have a clear idea of what you want to say about the work, you are ready to write the final critique. There is no set formula for what materials the critique should contain or for the order of their presentation. However, your strategy should take into account the nature of the work itself, the kinds of things you want to say about it and, the requirements of any specific assignment you have been given. These elements should be included: author, title, publisher, and edition—this information may be stated in the first paragraph, or serve as a heading. You may want to include an evaluation, usually a sentence or two stating your overall opinion. Sometimes it is helpful to “set the stage” by furnishing relevant historical, sociological, or ideological background. You will probably also want to include a brief description of the book’s contents. This information need not be separate from your discussion and evaluation; often it is more effective to describe and evaluate the book’s ideas or arguments point by point rather than listing all key points and then moving into a general discussion.

The heart of the critique lies in your evaluation and response. You may want to discuss specific strengths and weaknesses of the work, or you may prefer to deal with the significance or implications of its argument. In addition, you may want to present some idea or theory of your own that the book has generated. You may also find it effective to do all the things. In this portion of the critique, regardless of the approach you decide to use, you should be as specific as possible. This is the time to refer to specific passages and quote relevant and illustrative selections exactly.

Finally, you should include at least a brief conclusion. This may consist of your final statement of evaluation: what the value of the work is, what the value or argument implies, and the conclusions you have reached in response to it.

As a prose form, the critique allows a great deal of room for your own individual approach. You should never view suggestions for critique writing as formulas to be followed religiously. Your individual response and judgments are vital elements of the critique. A critique should not be a mere report but rather an opportunity for expanding and demonstrating your ability to read thoughtfully and critically, and expressing in a clear and concise prose your knowledgeable response.

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