

The Book Review or Article Critique: General Guidelines

An analytic or critical review of a book or article is not primarily a summary; rather, it **comments on** and **evaluates** the work in the light of specific issues and theoretical concerns in a course. (To help sharpen your analytical reading skills, see our file on [Critical Reading](#).) The literature review puts together a set of such commentaries to map out the current range of positions on a topic; then the writer can define his or her own position in the rest of the paper. Keep questions like these in mind as you read, make notes, and write the review.

1. What is the specific topic of the book or article? What overall purpose does it seem to have? For what readership is it written? (The preface, acknowledgements, bibliography and index can be helpful in answering these questions. Don't overlook facts about the author's background and the circumstances of the book's creation and publication.)
2. Does the author state an explicit thesis? Does he or she noticeably have an axe to grind? What are the theoretical assumptions? Are they discussed explicitly? (Again, look for statements in the preface, etc. and follow them up in the rest of the work.)
3. What exactly does the work contribute to the overall topic of your course? What general problems and concepts in your discipline and course does it engage with?
4. What kinds of material does the work present (e.g. primary documents or secondary material, literary analysis, personal observation, quantitative data, biographical or historical accounts)?
5. How is this material used to demonstrate and argue the thesis? (As well as indicating the overall structure of the work, your review could quote or summarize specific passages to show the characteristics of the author's presentation, including writing style and tone.)
6. Are there alternative ways of arguing from the same material? Does the author show awareness of them? In what respects does the author agree or disagree?
7. What theoretical issues and topics for further discussion does the work raise?
8. What are your own reactions and considered opinions regarding the work?

Browse in published scholarly book reviews to get a sense of the ways reviews function in intellectual discourse. Look at journals in your discipline or general publications such as *University of Toronto Quarterly*, *London Review of Books*, or *New York Review of Books*.

Some reviews summarize the book's content and then evaluate it; others integrate these functions, commenting on the book and using summary only to give examples. Choose the method that seems most suitable according to your professor's directions.

To keep your focus, remind yourself that your assignment is primarily to discuss the book's treatment of its topic, not the topic itself. Your key sentences should therefore say "This book shows...the author argues" rather than "This happened...this is the case."

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