

WRITING A CRITICAL REVIEW

Based on notes for Geos114 by R. Howitt

What is a critical review and why write one?

- A critical review is an exercise in critical thinking and evaluation.
- Critical thinking is not just being negative. It means thinking carefully and clearly - thinking about both strengths and weaknesses in the material under review.
- It should help you develop your ability to comprehend and summarise the material presented for review, to think clearly and critically about it, and to exercise judgment on it in the light of what you know, or what you can find out, about the issues dealt with.
- A critical review is also an exercise in effective writing.
- You should aim to write your review concisely and clearly.
- The skills you use in writing a critical review are important ones and will be useful to you in other work at Macquarie and, indeed, in your subsequent career.
- There are many ways to write a review of a book, article, video or computer package, partly depending on the nature of the material and the audience: fiction might require a different style from an academic publication, for example, and there is always scope for the reviewer to express his/her individuality in the way the task is undertaken.
- The following notes provide some guidelines on the sort of things your review should include. In addition, most of the academic journals held in the Library contain book reviews; you could consult them to see the sort of thing that is required.

CONTENT OF YOUR REVIEW

- ***A critical review should contain three components: description, analysis and appraisal.***
These are often arranged sequentially. But this is not essential; for example, you might find it appropriate to combine description and analysis in the same part of the review.
- **Description** involves providing a brief, accurate summary of the subject matter, approach to it, arguments developed, their manner of presentation and conclusions reached in the items under review.
 - 1) What is the essential aim of the material under review?
 - 2) Can you summarise the content in just a few sentences?
 - 3) Are specific arguments developed?
 - 4) Is something important hidden or misleading?

This is a very important part of the review, to ensure that the reviewer has a firm grasp of what is being written about and to provide the reader with a summary and comparison of the content of the package concerned.

- **Analysis** involves a careful examination of the merits of the content and argument and the way they been presented.
This is often the weakest part of reviews, even those prepared by experienced reviewers; it is the most difficult, but ***probably the most important, part of the review.***
 - 1) How well do you judge the aims are achieved and why?
 - 2) How valid are the basic proposals or arguments put forward in the material?
 - 3) How credible is the argument or position put forward and the data on which it is based?
 - 4) How well is that argument developed, supported and sustained?
 - 5) Supplementary questions to think about might include:
 - Are there any ways in which the report has failed? If so, why do you think this has happened?
 - What deficiencies are there in the argument, or the evidence used to support it or the manner of presentation?
 - What hasn't been achieved as well as it might have been?
 - The analysis of the deficiencies should, as far as possible, be in terms of the apparent aims of the package. Try to evaluate the material from the standpoint its authors have taken - in other words, assess it in its own terms. State your understanding of what the producers have tried to do and indicate whether or not you think they have succeeded.
You can go on to evaluate the merits of the producers' position. When criticising, be fair and be specific. You should use material from other sources (properly referenced without plagiarising) to consider the merits (and perhaps truthfulness or completeness of the material).
There is no point in making vaguely derogatory remarks such as 'The author makes a bad case' or 'The producers have done a poor job'. You should support such statements with specific examples and evidence of why it is bad and how it could have been improved, or how someone else has done it better.
- **Appraisal**, or evaluation, involves making an overall assessment of the material and its overall value.
 - 1) Does the report contribute something worthwhile - new information, new arguments, a new perspective on issues, significant evidence, and so on?
 - 2) For whom is this a useful way of portraying the information?
 - 3) Is it a helpful resource for learning about the issue?

The appraisal is generally brief, really a summary of your overall evaluation of the items.
Justify and explain your response. It is possible to give fulsome praise or overwhelming criticism, although in most cases your assessment is likely to fall somewhere between these two extremes. Whatever your reaction, it is important to justify and explain your response.
- **Study other items** to complete your review. You will need to have a grasp of the issues and interpretations present in the literature. Any books, papers, electronic resources or other material that you have mentioned must be listed in a bibliography at the end of the text, with full bibliographic details given in a standard bibliographic format.