

Writing a Critical Review
Notes
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February 2013

Writing a critical review is important training for writing longer essays, encouraging you to hone your critical skills on a directed topic.

First, there are two ways of writing reviews. One is more journalistic, emphasises writing for a general audience and welcomes personal judgments. The other is more academic in the sense that it is impersonal and requires references and footnotes exactly as in other academic writing. The MA CAA, being partly Historical and partly Anthropological can follow different conventions. In the first we are trying to instil the discipline of being utterly impersonal. Traditional academic work would be strictly impersonal, but developments in recent decades have opened up ways of being personal, which we teach in the Research methods module. Impersonal and personal styles both have their place and can be used separately. In Critical Reviews we are looking for the impersonal. Keep 'I' and 'me' out of your language, keep your feelings out of it and focus on the material.

As review is academic and not journalistic, you don't have to make any personal valuation or recommendation. You don't need to write such things as 'This book makes a major contribution to the field', or 'This books is highly recommended'. Instead you should concentrate on dissecting the ideas in the chapter or article.

You will find the following resources very useful in the writing of academic article and book reviews. I have incorporated advice from my colleague Steve McCluskey in the History department at the University of Virginia. I have also extracted from 'Writing the Academic Book Review by Wendy Belcher'

Steve McCluskey writes 'Academic journal and book reviews serve as concise overviews of new publications. They provide interested specialist and non-specialist readers with a 'bluffer's guide' to the book's content and a critique of its argument. Writing a good one may take several drafts, as they must be short, precise, yet insightful and analytical. Use the following four steps to help you write your book review'.

Guidelines

A.Structure

1 Identify

You should begin by identifying the book or chapter being reviewed. To confirm, and take an example, you should write something like,

Nicholas Campion's two-volume *History of Western Astrology* was published by Continuum in 2008-9 and was aimed at a general historical audience',¹ or 'Nicholas Campion's article on 'Astronomy and Psyche in the Classical World: Plato, Aristotle, Zeno, Ptolemy' was published in the on-line, open-source *Journal of Cosmology* in 2010, which is targeted at scientific cosmologists'.²

Note that the full details can be given in a footnote.

Here's another example:

James Brown's paper 'One Summer in Somerset', dealing with the soul in modern cosmology, was first published in *The Journal for Peripatetic Paradigms* in Spring 2002.

2. Locate

Identify the subject matter and the intended audience (students, scholars or general public) place the text in current scholarly debate, if possible. When was it written? What does that tell you about its context? Look at such questions as whether the author is consciously trying to refute someone else's arguments? if so, who, or which group of scholars? Upon which side of the debate is the writer?

3. Summarise

Briefly summarise the article; what is the author's argument? Depending upon the structure of the article and the complexity of the argument, you may be able to write an overall summary or you may need to deal with multiple arguments or the development of an argument by following the author's use of sections or parts;

4 Analyse and Criticise

Examine the author's argument and his/her use of sources. What kinds of sources have been used? Are there any obvious sources or types of sources that are missing? Is the argument well-footnoted? Does the author prove his/her point? if not, why not? Are there contradictions or inconsistencies? identify the article's greatest strength(s) and greatest weakness(es);

5. Conclude

¹ Nicholas Campion, *A History of Western Astrology*, Vol 1. The Ancient World, London: Continuum, 2009 (first published as *The Dawn of Astrology: A Cultural History of Western Astrology*, London: Continuum, 2008, Vol. 2, The Medieval and Modern Worlds, London: Continuum, 2009.

² Nicholas Campion, 'Astronomy and Psyche in the Classical World: Plato, Aristotle, Zeno, Ptolemy', *Journal of Cosmology*, 2010, Vol. 9.
<http://journalofcosmology.com/AncientAstronomy118.html>

Your conclusion should briefly wrap up your critique of the article. After considering all the above, is it a valuable piece of scholarship? Or not? Does it add to our knowledge? Should this book be read and by whom? One needn't be negative to evaluate; for instance, explaining how a text relates to current debates in the field is a form of evaluation.

B. Guidelines

1.Impartiality

Judge the book by its intentions not yours. Don't criticize the author for failing to write the book you think that he or she should have written.

2.Citing Other Works

You should use a number of other texts in your critique. For example, in the Introductory module, by the time you write your review, you will have read a number of works on culture and cultural astronomy. Any one of these could be used to support your analysis and criticism. In fact, in any module, by the time you submit a Review, if the module requires it,

As a guide, you should use perhaps read and cite 5 other works. More is fine.

3.Direct Quotes

Direct quotes are important but should be short. You have a limited number of words so have to strike a balance between quoting directly from the piece being reviewed or from other sources, and paraphrasing in your own words. The general rule in all essays is that direct quotes should be no more than 10% of the total.

4. Footnotes

Footnotes are vital. Even though it seems repetitive, you should provide footnotes for statements you make about the piece you are reviewing. If you say that 'the author says x and y', you should provide a reference and a footnote. For example, if you are reviewing Gumerman and Warburton on Cultural Astronomy every time you note some important information or an important argument from their work, or make a direct quote from it, you should include a footnote to their work in the normal style.

Also remember that the first time you cite a work you give the full details. The second time you use an abbreviation which is full enough to indicate the work.

Therefore the first foot note would be

George J., Gumerman, and Miranda Warburton, 'The Universe in a Cultural Context: An Essay', in Fountain, John W., and Rolf M. Sinclair (eds.), *Current Studies in Archaeoastronomy: Conversations Across Time and Space*, Durham NC.; Carolina Academic Press, 2005, p. 16.

The second foot note might then be

Gumerman and Warburton, 'The Universe', p. 123.

Comparing two works

In some instances the assignment is to compare two articles. In that case you can follow the guide above. Use the structure for writing a Critical Review of one article, and focus on the comparison.

Other on-line resources are at

University of New South Wales, Learning Skills Centre, 'Writing a Critical Review'
<http://www.lc.unsw.edu.au/onlib/critrev.html>

University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. '
http://www.unc.edu/depts/wcweb/handouts/literature_review.html, 'Literature Reviews'