

Critical reviews of journal articles

A critical review evaluates the clarity, quality and originality of research, as well as its relevance and presentation. A good review carefully analyzes an article's strengths and weaknesses before assessing its overall value.

Writing a critical review can be a useful academic exercise that helps to improve basic research skills. By assessing the work of others, students become familiar with specific evaluation criteria for social science research and develop critical thinking skills of more general application.

GETTING STARTED

Make sure you understand all requirements for the critical review you have been asked to write. The editors of peer-reviewed journals typically supply "Instructions to reviewers" and/or evaluation forms to structure the reviewer's comments. Check the assignment instructions for similar information on the expected format and content of your review. Are grading criteria included? Keep such expectations in mind while reading the article, and consult your instructor if you are unclear on any aspect of the assignment.

INTRODUCING YOUR REVIEW

Bibliographic citation. Begin with a full bibliographic citation for the journal article, using the appropriate style guide. For education and other social science research, use APA Style.

Overview. Highlight the purpose, methodology, significant findings and conclusions of the article.

Authorship. Review the author's qualifications and authority if this information is available. Some journals provide basic information in a separate "Notes on contributors" section. Many scholars provide more detailed information about their research interests and publications on the Internet.

Audience. Identify the intended audience. Consult the journal's editorial policy or statement of purpose for this information.

Impact. Comment on the article's reception.

ORGANISING THE BODY OF YOUR REVIEW

The simplest way to organise your review is to follow the structure of the article. A well organised research article has readily identifiable sections including the introduction, methodology, results (findings), and discussion (conclusions and recommendations). Briefly describe, discuss and evaluate the key points involved in each section of the article. Some of the questions which may apply are identified below.

Introduction

Does the author clearly define a research problem or topic?

Is its significance explained? Are core issues or research variables identified?

Is specialized terminology usefully defined?

Does the author provide an adequate literature review?

Does it discuss current research on the problem, and help to situate the author's own research?

Are the research objectives clearly stated? Are hypotheses or specific research questions identified?

Methodology

Does the author clearly identify the research methodology and any associated limitations of the research design?

Are participants described, including the method of sample selection if appropriate?

Are instruments adequately described, including issues of appropriateness, validity and reliability?

Do any evident biases or ethical considerations arise in relation to the methodology?

Are the methods for measuring results clearly explained and appropriate?

Results

Are the author's major findings clearly presented?

Do they adequately address the stated research objectives?

Are supporting data presented? Are tables, graphs or figures helpful and well integrated with the text?

Discussion

Do the research results validate the author's conclusions and/or recommendations?

Are alternative conclusions and/or limitations of the research considered?

Is there discussion of any variance between the author's research and prior research findings?

Does the author's research suggest any direction for further research?

Is the practical or theoretical significance of the research emphasized?

Does the author recommend the revision of theory or practice in the field?

CONCLUDING YOUR REVIEW

Considering the needs and interests of a typical reader of the journal in which the article appears, provide your personal judgement on the suitability and adequacy of the research. Distinguish between the overall quality of the research project and the report of it as presented in the journal article.

Is the research timely and worthwhile?

Is the research design appropriately inclusive and/or sensitive to the cultural context?

Are you aware of any significant omissions or errors that might affect the validity or reliability of the research?

Are the results original and significant?

Does the author provide fresh insight or stimulate needed discussion in the field?

Is the article well structured?

Are the sections of appropriate length?

Do the author's style and language maintain interest and clarity?

Is the presentation unbiased, objective and reasonable?

Is the author respectful of participants and the work of other researchers?