WRITING CRITICAL REVIEWS and COMPARE AND CONTRAST REVIEWS

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Nick Campion
School of Archaeology, History and Anthropology

These notes were written for students in the MA Cultural Astronomy and Astrology (MA CAA) which explains particular references, but are generally applicable if you on another MA, such as Ancient Religions.

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

A critical review is a review of any existing piece of writing. It may be a review of a secondary (i.e., usually academic) article or book, or of a primary source. This will be specified in the instructions you are given for any piece of assessment.

Reviews of academic articles and books reviews serve as concise overviews and critical examinations 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.

Sometimes (as in the Introduction module in the Cultural Astronomy MA) the Critical Review is partly 'diagnostic' - which means at it allows us to decide what advice you need prior to the writing of your second essay. For you, it's the first piece of work in the course, so it's a means of allowing you to feel your way into the work. Remember, this is not just a review, it’s a CRITICAL review, so evaluate and comment on the claims that are made.

In this sense, being critical does not mean being negative. It means being analytical, and neutral – you must be led by the evidence.

Sometimes students are asked to write a journalistic review, with opinions and value judgments.

However, you are being asked to write an academic review – and not a journalistic one. In other words, it is carefully considered and based on the evidence before you. It should be carefully structured and use references, exactly as in any academic piece of writing.

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 book is highly recommended’. Instead you should concentrate on dissecting the ideas in the chapter or article.

At the same time, you can, if you wish, refer to the article's significance, if it has had an impact on wider ideas, and you have evidence that can show this.

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 at the University of Virginia, who I gratefully acknowledge. His four-fold structure (Identify, Locate, Summarise, Analyse) is invaluable. I have also used 'Writing the Academic Book Review by Wendy Belcher'
http://www.chicano.ucla.edu/press/siteart/jli_bookreviewguidelines.pdf

A NOTE: COMPARE AND CONTRAST REVIEWS

In some essays you are required to compare and contrast more than one paper, for example, two JSTOR papers, or three primary sources. The structure for a critical review of one paper can be adapted to the comparison of multiple papers. In that case you can follow the guide below. Use the structure for writing a Critical Review of one article, and focus on the comparison.

For example, in your introduction introduce both works. Similarly, in the other sections deal with both. Look for differences and similarities in the authors' arguments, ideas, writing styles and general approach. Are their assumptions similar or different, and how do their conclusions compare?

READ WELL!

STRUCTURE

The following is a typical structure of an academic critical review.

1. Identify
Identify the text through a complete bibliographic entry in the first sentence; comment on the nature of the text

You should begin by identifying the book or chapter being reviewed. To 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:

[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.

> 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, general public, etc.) place the text(s) in current historiographical debate, if possible: is the author consciously trying to refute someone else's arguments? if so, who, or which group of historians? upon which side of the debate is the writer? (read the introduction and first chapters carefully, as this information is most likely to be located there).

Also, consider when the piece was written. That will help you, and your reader, understand its context in terms of changing scholarship.

(You may not be able to complete this section until you have written (3) and (4)).

3. Summarise
Briefly summarise the paper, chapter or book; what is the author's argument? depending upon the structure of the book 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
Remember, the point of academic work is not to describe or summarise, but to criticise and analyse.
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?
identify the book's greatest strength(s) and greatest weakness(es);
Don't make value judgments – stick to the evidence and arguments you have presented.

5. Conclude

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[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

Remember, a conclusion should always conclude what's in your essay and not introduce new material. Consider here your final view on the context, strengths, weaknesses and possible importance of the piece you are reviewing.

Advice

1.Citing Other Works
You should use a number of other texts in your critique. For example, in the Introductory MA CAA 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.

As a guide, you should use perhaps 3, 4 or 5 other works to cite.

2.Direct Quotes
Direct quotes are important but should be short. You only have 1000 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.

3. 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 quite 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.

*** If you are taking another MA, not the MA CAA, it is perfectly acceptable for you to use the referencing style of that MA.

COMPARE AND CONTRAST REVIEWS
If you are comparing and contrasting two or three papers or sources, it is simplest to stick to the structure outlined here, having one introduction where you introduce all two or three papers and so on.

Appendix
Book Reviews

From, 'Writing the Academic Book Review by Wendy Belcher'
http://www.chicano.ucla.edu/press/siteart/jli_bookreviewguidelines.pdf

This guide is written for book reviews but is relevant for shorter reviews as well.

Avoiding Five Common Pitfalls
1. Evaluate the text, don't just summarize it. While a succinct restatement of the text's points is important, part of writing a book review is making a judgment. Is the book a contribution to the field? Does it add to our knowledge? Should this paper, chapter or 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.

2. Do not cover everything in the book. In other words, don't use the table of contents as a structuring principle for your review. Try to organize your review around the book's argument or your argument about the book.

3. Judge the piece under review 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. As John Updike puts it, "Do not imagine yourself the caretaker of any tradition, an enforcer of any party standards, a warrior in any ideological battle, a corrections officer of any kind."

4. Likewise, don't spend too much time focusing on gaps. Since a book is only 200 to 500 pages, it cannot possibly address the richness of any topic. For this reason, the most common criticism in any review is that the book doesn't address some part of the topic. If the book purports to be about ethnicity and film and yet lacks a chapter on Latinos, by all means, mention it. Just don't belabor the point. Another tic of reviewers is to focus too much on books the author did not cite. If you are using their bibliography just to display your own knowledge it will be obvious to the reader. Keep such criticisms brief.

5. Don't use too many quotes from the book. It is best to paraphrase or use short telling quotes within sentences.

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’