

Writing a Critical Review

A Critical Review (also called a **Summary and Critique**) is similar to an **Annotated Bibliography** in that it is a written response to a single text. This text can be a peer-reviewed journal article, a book chapter, or a book. A critical review is usually longer than an annotated bibliography (800-1000 words or more).

Typically, a critical review will begin with a short introduction, then provide a summary of the key ideas contained in the source text. The summary should be sufficiently detailed so that the reader does not need to read the original source article. This will be followed by an *appraisal or critique* of those ideas, after which a short conclusion is provided. The weighting of the summary and critique sections should be approximately equal. Your lecturer might specify additional elements to be included in your critical review (e.g., the search terms used to find source articles, the criteria used to judge an article, or appendices outlining CASP checklists*).

Avoid using quotations when writing a critical review; the review must include your paraphrases of key ideas in the article in the summary section and your own critical evaluation in response to the article in the critique section. No headings or subheadings are used in a critical review.

*These additional requirements are discipline-specific and not always required for critical reviews. NB: CASP checklists are critical appraisal tools to be used when reading research articles. See: <https://casp-uk.net/casp-tools-checklists/>

What is a critique?

It is an assessment of both the positive and negative elements of an article. You must make clear judgments - don't 'sit on the fence'.

As you read an article prior to writing a critical review, think about the following:

- *Objectives*: what does the article set out to do? What is the writer/research intention or purpose?
- *Question*: what is the research question(s)? Are you convinced by the answers to these questions?
- *Hypotheses*: are there specific hypotheses? Are the hypotheses testable?
- *Theory*: is there an explicit theoretical framework? If not, are there important theoretical assumptions or beliefs?
- *Concepts*: what are the central concepts in the article? Are they clearly defined? Has the author overlooked key concepts?
- *Argument*: what is the central argument? Is it valid and are the premises sound? Do you agree with it?
- *Method*: what methods are employed to test the hypothesis(es)? Are they reasonable (see below)
- *Evidence*: is evidence provided in the article? How adequate is it?
- *Values*: what value judgments does the author express? Are they clear or are they tacit/hidden? Should they be made clearer?
- *Literature*: how does the work fit into the wider literature in the area? Is important literature in the field missing?
- *Contribution*: how well does the work advance our knowledge of the subject?
- *Style*: how clear is the author's language/style/expression? (adapted from ANU, 2022)

In relation to methodological considerations, ask yourself:

- Is the method sound and validated, considering other research in the field?
- Is there a sufficient sample size of participants tested (if a quantitative study)?
- If questionnaires are used, are the questions clear and unambiguous? Fair/unfair?
- Are common flaws identified in the research design, such as confirmation or observer bias, or unexplained or overstated results?
- Does the evidence support the conclusions?

Structure

The structure of a critical review is shown below. A Critical Review will make liberal use of **critical review language** and **signposting**. See examples in bold below.

Introduction

This includes:

- A citation of the article reviewed in a conventional referencing style (usually APA 7th Edition).
- A general overview of the topic, question(s), or aim(s) raised in the text.
- An overall evaluative comment on the text being reviewed.

Example

Silva, M. C. (1986). Research testing nursing theory: State of the art. *Advanced Nursing Science*, 9(1), 1-11. <https://doi.org/10.1097/00012272-198610000-00003>

Silva's paper argues that nurse theorists, researchers and clinicians should move testing of nursing theory into the nursing mainstream. This review identifies the strengths and limitations of Silva's article and chronicles how the evaluation criteria for theory testing within the article have been refined since its publication. The paper discusses how philosophy, with an emphasis on epistemology affects testing of nursing theory and reflects on philosophical issues to show that ... The paper argues that the claims made by the author are ... [end with your overall conclusion about the article].

Summary

The summary section requires you to:

- Establish the key ideas/evidentiary or experimental claims made in the text
- List them from *most* to *least* significant
- Summarise each idea/evidentiary claim dispassionately as though you were providing a concise overview of the article for someone who has not read the article.
- Use the present tense for the author's ideas even if they are published in the past (it is assumed they still believe their ideas). For research findings, use the past tense, e.g., *found that...*

Example

Silva's paper argues for increased clarity over the term 'testing of nursing theory' that has been overused but little understood in the literature. She achieves this clarity by delineating the following seven evaluation criteria that distinguished the testing of nursing theory from other types of evaluation criteria in nursing research: 1)....2)...7) The second point of Silva's article is the distinction made between evaluation criteria and the testing of nursing theory and evaluation criteria for the overall quality of a research study. She asserts that ... The third main claim made in the paper is that ... She provides evidence from an experimental pilot project on ... to show that ... [outline of main points and evidence continues].

Critique

This section is the most important as it demonstrates your ability to critically assess the article. In writing this section:

- Take it for granted that published articles by world experts are never perfect. There are always limitations and caveats and ways that research can be improved. Research articles will often identify 'limitations' as part of the paper. You can expand on these limitations, but you need to consider other areas in which the article might be flawed as part of your critical review.

- Devote a paragraph for each critical response if you have a lot to say; combine ideas together in one paragraph if they are closely related concerns.
- If your critique is more positive than negative, present the negative points first and the positive points last. End with a statement of why you agree with the article overall. If your critique is more negative than positive, do the opposite.
- If the article is equally balanced in terms of positive and negative points, you need to decide overall what your judgement is after weighing up the positive and negative points. Don't 'sit on the fence'.
- Consider including *recommendations* for how the text can be improved in terms of methodological improvements, a clearer research approach, the inclusion of additional theories or frameworks, or a more suitable experimental paradigm. (adapted from University of New South Wales, 2022)

Example

One of the strengths of Silva's article is also one of its limitations; that is, the seven formative evaluation criteria need far more precision and scope than that given in the paper. Chinn and Kramer (1999), Fawcett (1989), Melesis (1991) and Walker and Avant (1988) have all made contributions in terms of ... and the author seems unaware of these developments. Second, although Silva gives a plausible explanation for choosing ... evidence from other sources show that the results could not be generalised to all nursing theories in existence when the paper was written in 1986 (Jackson, 1986). Thus, the degree to which the results may have differed may have been compromised. A third limitation with Silva's article is that only one approach to the testing of nursing theory was described. But this avoids mention of three other approaches to ... This seriously limits the [critique continues].

Conclusion

This must be as brief and succinct as possible. In a critical review of 800 words, a conclusion might not even be necessary. If required, do the following:

- Remind the reader in a single sentence of your overall position on the article, positive or negative, and *why* you have made this judgement.
- End with a positive point about how the text has contributed to your understanding of the topic and the discipline as a whole. If it hasn't done so, leave this sentence out.

Example

This review **argues that** Silva's article **fails to make.... /makes a significant contribution to/** our understanding of ... because ... [Despite this], **Silva's article is worth reading** to get clearer understanding of how nurses have systematically contributed to evaluation criteria for empirical testing of nursing theory. This bodes well for the advancement of nursing science and the future of nursing.

References

Australian National University. (2022). *Critical review*. <https://www.anu.edu.au/students/academic-skills/writing-assessment/other-assessments/critical-review>

University of New South Wales. (2022). *Structure of a critical review*. <https://www.student.unsw.edu.au/structure-critical-review>

Other helpsheets available

- Incorporating Evidence
- Annotated Bibliography
- Editing your Writing