

Chapter Seven

The Critique Exercise

- What's a Critique and Why Does it Matter?
- Selecting a Text to Critique
- Starting With a "Close Reading"
- Criteria: Your Reasons for Evaluation
- Assignment: Writing a Critique Essay
- * Questions to consider as you write your first draft
 - * Review and Revision
 - * A Student Example: "A Critique of 'Self-Report of ADHD Symptoms in University Students' by Ashley Nelson"

What's a Critique and Why Does it Matter?

Critiques evaluate and analyze a wide variety of things (texts, images, performances, etc.) based on reasons or criteria. Sometimes, people equate the notion of "critique" to "criticism," which usually suggests a negative interpretation. These terms are easy to confuse, but I want to be clear that critique and criticize don't mean the same thing. A negative critique might be said to be "criticism" in the way we often understand the term "to criticize," but critiques can be positive too.

We're all familiar with one of the most basic forms of critique: reviews (film reviews, music reviews, art reviews, book reviews, etc.). Critiques in the form of reviews tend to have a fairly simple and particular point: whether or not something is "good" or "bad."

Academic critiques are similar to the reviews we see in popular sources in that critique writers are trying to make a particular point about whatever it is that they are critiquing. But there are some differences between the sorts of critiques we read in academic sources versus the ones we read in popular sources.

- **The subjects of academic critiques tend to be other academic writings and they frequently appear in scholarly journals.**
- **Academic critiques frequently go further in making an argument beyond a simple assessment of the quality of a particular book, film, performance, or work of art.** Academic critique writers will often compare and discuss several works that are similar to each other to make some larger point. In other words, instead of simply commenting on whether something was good or bad, academic critiques tend to explore issues and ideas in ways that are more complicated than merely "good" or "bad."



The main focus of this chapter is the value of *writing* critiques as a part of the research writing process. Critiquing writing is important because in order to write a good critique you need to *critically read*: that is, you need to closely read and understand whatever it is you are critiquing, you need to apply appropriate criteria in order to evaluate it, you need to summarize it, and to ultimately make some sort of point about the text you are critiquing.

These skills-- critically and closely reading, summarizing, creating and applying criteria, and then making an evaluation-- are key to The Process of Research Writing, and they should help you as you work through the process of research writing.

In this chapter, I've provided a "step-by-step" process for making a critique. I would encourage you to quickly read or skim through this chapter first, and then go back and work through the steps and exercises describe.

Selecting the right text to critique

The first step in writing a critique is selecting a text to critique. For the purposes of this writing exercise, you should check with your teacher for guidelines on what text to pick. If you are doing an annotated bibliography as part of your research project (see chapter 6, "The Annotated Bibliography Exercise"), then you are might find more materials that will work well for this project as you continuously research.

Short and simple newspaper articles, while useful as part of the research process, can be difficult to critique since they don't have the sort of detail that easily allows for a critical reading. On the other hand, critiquing an entire book is probably a more ambitious task than you are likely to have time or energy for with this exercise. Instead, consider critiquing one of the more fully developed texts you've come across in your research: an in-depth examination from a news magazine, a chapter from a scholarly book, a report on a research study or experiment, or an analysis published in an academic journal. These more complex essays usually present more opportunities for issues to critique.

Depending on your teacher's assignment, the "text" you critique might include something that isn't in writing: a movie, a music CD, a multimedia presentation, a computer game, a painting, etc. As is the case with more traditional writings, you want to select a text that has enough substance to it so that it stands up to a critical reading.



Exercise 7.1

Pick out at least three different possibilities for texts that you could critique for this exercise. If you've already started work on your research and an annotated bibliography for your research topic, you should consider those pieces of research as possibilities. Working alone or in small groups, consider the potential of each text. Here are some questions to think about:

- Does the text provide in-depth information? How long is it? Does it include a "works cited" or bibliography section?
- What is the source of the text? Does it come from an academic, professional, or scholarly publication?
- Does the text advocate a particular position? What is it, and do you agree or disagree with the text?

Starting with a "Close Reading"

The next and most important step in the process of critique writing is reading very carefully whatever it is you are going to critique. The type of "close reading" that is essential to the process of writing a good critique should not be confused with the sort of casual reading we do when reading the newspaper in the morning over coffee or surfing the Internet (?) or browsing through a magazine.

Close reading is a type of reading where the reader *critically* engages with the text in order to understand it, question it, evaluate it, and form an opinion about it. This is a method of reading where the reader has to slow down and think along each step of the way. The reader furthers her understanding of the text by writing as she reads and by stopping to look up unfamiliar words in a dictionary. Ultimately, once done with a close reading of a text, the reader has begun to form an opinion about the text and is ready to make an evaluation of it.

Close reading is not difficult to do, but it is an academic skill that can be challenging, time-consuming, and even *exhausting* to those who aren't used to doing it. Learning to closely read is challenging at first, similar in many ways to the experience many of us have when we first start an exercise program. If you have not previously trained as a runner and are not in good physical condition from some other sort of athletic training, you would find it challenging if not impossible to run five miles. But if you start small, keep training, and learn and practice good habits, chances are that what once was impossible (running five miles) is now within your grasp.

The same is true with close reading: it can be a difficult and frustrating process, but with practice and patience, anyone can become a good close reader.



Here are some basic steps to help you in your close reading:

- **Write while you read.** This is the most essential part of closely reading.

Writing and reading are closely related activities, and when you write about your reading *as* you are reading (even *in* what you are reading), you inevitably understand what you are reading better than you do if you read without writing.

Close reading includes taking notes: writing down the most important points of the text, paraphrasing, summarizing, and so forth. Note taking is also an important part of the process of creating and maintaining an annotated bibliography and as part of the overall process of writing research.

But mostly, what I mean when I suggest you write as you read is much messier and less systematic than note taking. I'm thinking of activities where you write *in* what you are reading by writing in the margins, underlining key sentences and phrases, starring and circling text, and so forth.

What sort of things should you underline as you read and what sorts of things should you write "in" your reading? Generally speaking, you should underline key sentences and phrases and write comments in the margins that clarify the passage for you, that raise questions, that remind you that a passage contains a particularly important quote or idea, or that points out where you might agree or disagree with the text.

- **Explain the main points of the text in your own words.** When you put something in your own words, what you are essentially doing is "translating" the text you are critiquing into your own language and your own way of understanding something. This is an especially useful technique when you are closely reading complex and long texts—books or more complicated academic articles that you are having a hard time understanding. You might want to put the main points in your own words on a separate sheet of paper. Using a separate sheet of paper makes it easier to note questions or other points about the text as you read.

As well as helping you better understand a complex text, explaining the main points in your own words can create a sort of outline of the text you are critiquing, which is another way of understanding the text. I'm not suggesting you create what I would call a "formal" outline, complete with Roman numerals and appropriate letters underneath each heading. But if you put down on a separate sheet of paper a few sentences for the main points of the text, you will automatically have an outline of sorts, with each sentence describing the subject of a particular part of the reading.



- **Use a dictionary.** Chances are, you have had teachers tell you to do this all throughout your schooling. And if you are anything like me, you resisted using a dictionary while you read something for years because it slowed you down, because you couldn't take a dictionary wherever you wanted to go, and because it just seemed like tedious busy work. But trust me: using a dictionary (even a small, paperback one) can be really useful in close reading because it can help you understand key words and phrases, especially words you can't get from context.

Sometimes, I look up complex or abstract words (ideology, justice, democracy, etc.) in the dictionary, even if I know what they mean, because dictionary definitions will often expand or even change the way that I understand the term. If it's a particularly important or puzzling word, I will even go so far as to look it up in different dictionaries. The slight differences in definitions can often help create a more full understanding of a term.

- **Form an opinion as you read.** The two main goals of a close reading are to fully understand what the text means and to form an opinion about whatever it is you are closely reading. If you follow the steps for close reading I outline here, you will inevitably end up with a more informed opinion about the text that can be a starting point toward writing critically about the text.

Certainly you don't need to have a completely and neatly formed and complete opinion after you finish closely reading. But if you find yourself completing a close reading but still having *no* opinion about what it is you are closely reading, or if you have a vague and somewhat weak opinion about what it is you are closely reading ("it's okay," "there were some good points," "I liked his main idea," and so forth), then you probably have not read closely enough.

- **Keep questioning the text.** As you go along in your close reading, keep asking questions about the text: what is the point? do I agree or disagree with the text? why? what parts of the text are you confused about? how can you find answers to the questions you have? and how do you see it fitting into your research project? Keep asking these kinds of questions as you read and you will soon understand the text you are critiquing a lot better.



Exercise 7.2

- Following the guidelines I offer here, do a close reading of one of the pieces of research you have found. Be sure to write "in" the text as you read (either in the margins or with post-it notes), explain the main points in your own words, look up key words or words you don't understand in the dictionary, and closely read toward an opinion. Be sure to bring the work of your close reading to class to share and discuss with your classmates and your teacher.
- If you are working collaboratively with classmates on a research project, you can individually do close readings of a common text and compare your reactions. Once an agreed upon text is selected, each member of the collaborative group should individually closely read the same text. Bring to class in the work of your close reading to compare and discuss each of your group members' readings.

Criteria: Your Reasons for Your Evaluation

If you do a thorough close reading of your text (taking notes, writing things in the margins, highlighting key points, looking up things in the dictionary, etc.), then you will start to develop opinions about the text, and you will obviously have reasons for these opinions. In the most basic sense, the reasons you have for forming your opinion is the **criteria** you are using to form your evaluation.

Criteria are systems or standards for evaluation, rules or tests we use to make a judgment. We use criteria all the time. Take the Motion Picture Association of America's (MPAA) rating system, for example: films are assigned ratings of G, PG, PG-13, etc., by an MPAA board based on specific criteria (violence, language, adult themes, sexual content, etc.).

In many college courses, students are asked to evaluate texts based on more or less predetermined criteria. For an example, an essay test question that asks you to critique a novel based on its depiction of women and children within the given historical contexts more or less has created criteria for you. If you decided instead to evaluate this novel based on some other criteria, your teacher might be interested in your reading, but he might also be disappointed in your response, especially given that it was a question on a test.

More often than not though (and probably for your purposes here), writers choose their own criteria to the extent that they are appropriate for the text being critiqued. Suggesting that an article in an academic source is "bad" because it goes into too much detail, is written for a specialized audience, and doesn't include any glossy pictures would be unfair, because, as I discussed in some detail in chapter one, "Thinking Critically About Research," these criteria are not usually part of the goals or purposes of academic articles. The same could be



true of an article you found in a popular magazine. Suggesting it was "bad" because it seemed directed at too general of an audience and it simplified certain details about the topic would be unfair as well.

So, if there are no definite standard criteria to consider in a critique, how do you come up with criteria? Well, most of the questions suggested in chapter one on testing the credibility and reliability of your evidence might be used as criteria for your critique:

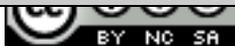
- **Who wrote the text and what are their qualifications?**
- **What do you think motivated the writer to write the text?**
- **Is the information in the text accurate and specific?**
- **Has the author interpreted the material fairly?**
- **Has the author defined terms clearly?**
- **Does the writer seem to support her point with good research and reasoning?**
- **Where was the text published?**
- **When was it published?**

Exercise 7.3

Take a look at a text you will potentially critique. If you've already done a close reading of a text for your critique, be sure to use the text you used for that exercise. Either individually or collaboratively, come up with a list of possible criteria for critiquing the text. List as many criteria as you can, keeping in mind that you will certainly not be considering all of the criteria you come up with in your critique essay. On a sheet of paper or in a word processing file, create two columns. List the possible criteria in one column. In the other column, note the parts of the text that you think of as support for your criteria. Here's a sample of a few entries:

Criteria	Support
Written by an expert	Speer in Marquette Poli/Sci department.
Supports ideas logically	Throughout, in the reference section, etc.
From a respected, credible and current source	<u>Crime, Law, and Social Change</u> academic source; article published in 2000.

Working individually or collaboratively, come up with a list of criteria that you think would **NOT** apply to the text you are considering for your critique. What sorts of possible criteria seem not fitting with the piece you are considering for your critique?



Summarizing Your Research

Critiques usually include one other important component: a summary of the text being critiqued. As I discussed in chapters two and six, the most obvious reason to summarize the text you are critiquing is your readers are probably not familiar with it. After all, one of the main reasons why potential readers (your classmates, your teacher, and other readers interested in your topic) might read your critique is to find out what it is you (the writer) think about the text being critiqued so the reader can decide whether or not to read it themselves.

When writing your summary, keep in mind:

- **Summaries don't contain your opinion or feelings about whatever it is you are summarizing.** Explain the key points and ideas of whatever it is you are summarizing, but save your opinions and reactions to your subject for the other parts of your critique.
- **Generally, summaries don't include quotes from the original source.** The goal of the summary is to explain the key points in your own words. However, you will want to use the quotes from the original in your critique to support your own opinion of whatever it is you are critiquing.
- **Summaries are short.** Like this item.

Figuring out how much summary to provide in a critique can be tricky because it depends on factors like the text you are critiquing, your purposes in your critique, how much you can expect your readers to know about whatever it is you are summarizing, and so forth.

But keep in mind that the goal of almost any summary (in a critique or in other types of writing) is to **get your reader familiar enough with whatever it is you are talking about so that you can go on to make your point.**



Exercise 7.4

- Write a brief summary of the text you intend to write your critique about, preferably one which you have already examined with a close reading and for which you have developed a list of possible criteria. For the purposes of this exercise, keep the summary brief—no more than 100 words or so—and be sure to strive for a summary that focuses as much as possible on “just the facts.” Show your summary to readers who haven’t read the text that you are summarizing and ask them if they understand what the text is generally about and if they have any questions about the text.
- With a group of collaborators and your teacher, decide on a text that you will all summarize. Individually, write a brief summary for readers you assume haven’t read the article. Keep the summaries short—less than 100 words or so—and be sure to strive for a summary that focuses as much as possible on “just the facts.” Come together in small groups to discuss each group members’ individually written summary. What similarities are there between each person’s summary? What are some of the notable differences between summaries?

Assignment: Writing a Critique Essay

If you have been doing the exercises and following through the process I’ve outlined in this chapter then you should be well on your way in the process of writing an effective critique. As you work on the writing assignment for this chapter, put to work your new knowledge of the process of critiquing.

Critique a selection of writing you have found in your research as part of the ongoing research project. The main goal of this critique is to provide a detailed review of the particular selection of writing that will help your audience learn about your position on the writing selection and also to help your audience decide for themselves whether or not the writing selection is something they might be interested in reading.

Questions to consider as you write your first draft

- If you are asked to choose your own text to critique, did you spend some time carefully considering possibilities? Why did you select the text that you did? Why did you rule out others?
- As part of your close reading, did you write both about and “in” the text that you are critiquing? What sort of marginal notes did you make? What are some of the key phrases or ideas that seemed important to you as you read that you underlined or noted with post-it notes in the margins? What kinds of questions about your reading did you write down as you read?



- How did you explain the main points of the text you closely read? What do you see as the main points of the text?
- Did you use a dictionary to look up words that you didn't understand and couldn't understand in context? Did you look up any complex or abstract terms? Did the dictionary definition of those terms help further your understanding of the word and the context where they occurred? Did you look up any terms that you saw as particularly important in different dictionaries? Did you learn anything from the different definitions?
- When you finished your close reading, what was your opinion of the text you closely read? Beyond a simple "good" or "bad" take on the reading, what are some of the reasons for your initial opinion about your reading?
- What criteria seem most appropriate for the text you are critiquing? Why? What would be an example of a criteria that would probably be *inappropriate* for this text? Did you consider some of the criteria that are similar to the tests for evidence I suggest in chapter one?
- Have you explained for the reader somewhere in the first part of the essay what your main point is? In other words, do you introduce the criteria you will be using to critique your text early on in your essay?
- Have you noted key quotes and passages that would serve as evidence in order to support your criteria? What passages are you considering quoting instead of paraphrasing? Are there other reasons you are turning to as support for your criteria?
- Have you written a summary of your text? How familiar do you think your audience is with whatever it is you are critiquing? How has that effected your summary?

Review and Revision

Considering the recommendations of classmates in a peer review group and of other readers is especially important for this project. After all, if the goal of a critique essay is to give readers an idea about what it is you think of a particular reading, their direct feedback can help ensure that you are actually accomplishing these goals.

Here are some questions you and your classmates want to consider as you revise your critique essays (of course, you and your teachers might have other ideas and questions to ask in review too!):

- Do your readers understand (generally speaking) the text that you are critiquing? Of course, how much your readers understand the essay you are critiquing will depend on how familiar they are with it, and as the writer of the critique, you will probably know and understand the text



better than your readers. But do they understand enough about the text to make heads or tails of the critique?

- Is there too much summary and not enough critique? That is, do the comments you are receiving from your readers suggest that they do fully understand the article you are critiquing, but they are not clear on the point you are trying to make with your critique? Have you considered where you are including summary information in different parts of your essay?
 - Do your readers understand the main point you are trying to make in your criteria? Have you provided some information and explanation about your criteria in the beginning part of your essay?
 - Do your readers seem to agree with you that your criteria are appropriate for whatever it is you are critiquing? Do they have suggestions that might help clarify your criteria? Do your readers have suggestions about different or additional criteria?
 - Are you quoting and paraphrasing the text you are critiquing effectively? Are there places where your readers have indicated they need more information from the critiqued text? Are there places where your readers think you might be relying too heavily on quotes or paraphrases from the critiqued text and wish they could read more about your opinion?
 - As your readers understand the article you are critiquing and the points you are making about it, do you think you have created any interest in your readers in actually reading the article themselves?
-



A Student Example:
"A Critique of 'Self-Report of ADHD Symptoms in University Students' by Ashley Nelson

The assignment for this student was similar to the one described earlier in this chapter, to write a brief critique essay about an important piece of research. Ashley's topic was on the use (and misuse) of drugs to treat attention deficit disorders in adult-aged patients. Ashley's essay begins with an introduction that explains how this exercise fits into her overall research project and a brief summary of the article she is critiquing. But most of her essay focuses on her critique of the article.

A Critique of "Self-Report of ADHD Symptoms in University Students: Cross-Gender and Cross-National Prevalence," by George J. DuPaul, Elizabeth A. Schaughency, Lisa L. Weyandt, Gail Tripp, Jeff Kiesner, Kenji Ota, and Heidy Stanish

While researching my topic, I came across many article that were interesting and that I thought could be useful for me with my research topic. When I read "Self-Report of ADHD Symptoms in University Students: Cross-Gender and Cross-National Prevalence," by George J. DuPaul et al, I knew it would be a good article to critique, too.

The article explains the symptoms of Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) and describes an experiment with university students in the United States, New Zealand, and Italy. 1,209 students took two different self-reported surveys. The goal of the survey was to examine the percentage of students who have ADHD symptoms, if symptoms vary between gender and country, and also to find out if symptom patterns agree with the Diagnostic Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM). The DSM creates the criteria to diagnose ADHD in young children. Most of the research on ADHD has been conducted with young children; therefore understanding the symptoms in college students has not been widely studied (370).

The results showed that gender was not a big factor in the United States. However, in Italy and New Zealand women had about a ten percent increase in the hyperactive-impulsive category. The results also proved that using the age adjusted diagnostic criteria, compared to the DSM, more college students reported having either one symptom or both.

I think this article is good for several reasons. DuPaul and his colleagues explain what ADHD is and why it is important for college



students to be diagnosed with the right criteria. The authors are also clearly experts in their fields. I also liked this article because the authors provide very good details about the results of their study.

DuPaul et al explain that ADHD "is characterized by developmentally inappropriate levels of inattention and impulsivity, and motor activity" (370). ADHD begins usually in early childhood. If a child is not treated for the disease, the symptoms will still appear in adulthood. These factors lead to "university students being at a higher risk for academic impairment and underachievement relative to their counterparts without ADHD" (370). Despite the risks to college students, according to DuPaul et al, most of the research on ADHD has focused on children, which is one of the motivations for this study in the first place.

The authors of this article were clearly qualified to conduct this study, too. Most of the researchers are college professors in psychology departments around the country and around the world. Further, most of the researchers specialize in issues having to do with ADHD (370). I think the authors' qualifications show that they are all motivated and dedicated to help people with this disease. This experience and dedication makes me believe that these writers conducted a credible study.

I also like this article because the authors do a good job of explaining their research and the results. They provide lots of information about the results throughout the article, and they also provide a number of useful tables, too. The authors believe that the DSM's standards of criteria for what counts as ADHD are wrong for young adults because it was created for children. So the researchers constructed a 24 item survey called the Young Adult Rating Scale that was based on traditional ADHD symptoms and on symptoms that would appear in college-aged young people (372).

The researchers point out that there were a variety of limitations with their study. For example, the students who participated in the survey were only from five different universities. In addition, the students were not asked any personal questions that could have effected the outcome of the survey (378). However, DuPaul and his colleagues believe that this study helps to pave the way for future students which "would provide a better understanding of the age-related changes associated with ADHD symptoms and the relevance of



these changes to diagnostic criteria for ADHD in university students and other adults" (378).

I think that "Self-Report of ADHD Symptoms in University Students" is an informative and interesting article, one I would certainly recommend to anyone interested in learning more about ADHD in young adults. DuPaul and his colleagues explained and interpreted the results of their survey very effectively.

Work Cited:

DuPaul, George; Elizabeth A. Schaughency, Lisa L. Weyandt, Gail Tripp, Jeff Kiesner, Kenji Ota, and Heidy Stanish. "Self-Report of ADHD Symptoms in University Students: Cross-Gender and Cross-National Prevalence." Journal of Learning Disabilities. 34.4 (July/August 2001). 370-379.

