# Critical Book and Article Reviews

This study guide focuses on critical reviews of academic non-fiction books and journal articles, the purposes of which are twofold:

* **Descriptive**: to inform the reader about the contents of the text, including the scope and nature of the topics covered, its main conclusions, and the evidence, examples, theories and methodologies it used to support of them.
* **Critical**: to pass judgement on the quality, meaning and significance of the book or article, including how well it has achieved its aims, and what it adds to our understanding of the topic.

A quality review will recognise both the strengths and weaknesses of a piece of writing, presenting your objective opinion of it in a confident, informative and balanced way. Finally, it will be written using phraseology and style appropriate to this particular form of writing (examples from published academic book reviews are presented throughout this guide for reference).

## Choosing material to review

Normally, it is easier to write a critical review of a book or article that puts forward an argument, thereby offering a good opportunity to critically evaluate the reasoning and evidence used to support it. Edited volumes ((consisting of chapters or articles written by different authors) can present many different, even contradictory, evaluations of the same topic – presenting a more complicated challenge for the reviewer. Therefore, choose material that lends itself to your task.

The following checklist will help you ask the right questions as you read the text. It also provides an example of the kind of academic language you might use to introduce each aspect of your review.

## Questions a critical book or article review should address

## What is the main topic?

This should be obvious from the title and the introduction.

‘This book offers a dialogue on the fundamental question of…’

## Who is the author?

What qualifications and experience does the author possess that allows them to write meaningfully about the topic?

‘Due to her role in… the author is in a unique position to describe…’

## How is the text structured in relation to the topics, themes, issues and examples discussed?

For a book refer to the table of contents, chapter titles and chapter introductions. If analysing a chapter from an edited text, check the editor’s introduction. Think about how the separate sections build into the text as a whole.

‘The book consists of nine chapters each of which addresses…

‘This article deals with two key themes relating to…’

## What is the stated purpose of the book or article?

Usually, this is stated on the back cover of a book (but beware of publisher hyperbole), or in the abstract/summary at the beginning of a journal article.

‘The author’s aim is to examine…’

‘This is an original and accessible guide to…

## What is the main argument?

Sometimes this is clearly stated, and sometimes more difficult to identify; remember that not all texts are argumentative.

‘The author’s main argument is that…’

‘The author calls into question many of the basic assumptions about…’

## What evidence is used to support the author’s claims and analysis?

Do they use statistical data, examples and case studies, expert opinion and official documentation, all academically sourced and cited? How valid and reliable is this evidence in supporting the author’s analysis?

‘Throughout the article, case studies are used to…’

‘Drawing on North American and British archives, this book…’

## What theoretical approach has the author used?

This is not always obvious from the text itself. Often, it will be necessary to conduct some additional research into the author to identify their background, or particular methodological, political or philosophical approach to the topic.

*‘*The author examines the nature of… from the perspective of…’

## What are the strengths of the book or article?

Having taken the time to understand the text, where do you think its strengths lie? For example, what key questions does it answer? Does it offer insights into complex problems, if so what? Does it open up new ways of understanding the topic, if so how? Does it present new evidence, or clarify concepts that were previously obscure? Is the written style particularly engaging?

‘Throughout the text, the author translates technical information into…’

‘The book is clearly written in a compelling, engaging style that…’

1. **What are its limitations?**

You should critique a piece of writing within its own terms of reference – that is, against what it claims to do. But, if you are sufficiently familiar with the topic, you can also assess its limitations against existing knowledge.

‘The narrow focus unfortunately leads the author to overlook…’

‘The author is very quick to dismiss opposing opinions, and assumes that…’

## What do you judge the overall value of the text to be?

Having undertaken a balanced assessment of its strengths and weaknesses, what is your overall judgement of its usefulness to those interested in the topic? And how does it compare to other scholarly publications in the same area of study?

‘The authors have made a significant contribution to our understanding of how…’

‘Overall, the article is an interesting… It offers an excellent… and is relevant to…’

‘The book is generally disappointing… it offers very little new …’

## Structure of a Critical Review

A simple structure for a short reviw of a book or journal article (c. 500-1000 words) would be as follows:

1. An introduction

2. A short summary of the text

3. The strengths of the text

4. The weaknesses of the text

5. A conclusion summarising your overall assessment of the text.

In longer critical reviews – comprising over 1000 words – each section, or aspect of the topic discussed in the text, would be described sequentially, incorporating a discussion of its strengths and weakness.

Finally, whilst all good critical reviews will address the questions detailed above, there can be considerable variations in style and structure. You might find it useful, therefore, to look at some published book or journal article reviews in the academic literature relevant to your discipline, in order to gather further ideas about how to compose your own piece of work.

Scan the QR code to book appointments, view our events calendar, watch skills videos and more…

