

Writing Critiques and Review Papers

A review of a book, movie, or theatrical performance depends upon a detailed breakdown of the reading or viewing experience. General comments such as "I really liked this book" or "This was a terrible movie" are not particularly useful in this kind of review because they don't offer any concrete reasons for the reviewer's opinion.

A review, which is sometimes called a critique or an evaluative paper, critically and carefully examines another writer's work, almost like a peer review. Reviews usually provide 1) some general background about the author and the work, 2) an overview of the topics the author covers, 3) an acknowledgment of what the author does well or of the contribution the work has made to the field, and 4) an analysis of what could have been done better.

Some Organizing Questions to Get You Started

- What kind of work is it, and who is its intended audience?
- What was the work about? Consider including a brief summary of the plots or the events described.
- What seems to be the author's main purpose? To offer advice, make practical suggestions, solve a specific problem? To critique? To establish the truth?
- What is the principal point, conclusion, thesis, contention, or question?
- What patterns or categories does the work use to divide up the subject matter being discussed?
- What is new, different, or controversial about the work in terms of the course text?
- How does the work fit into its genre? In other words, how does it measure up to similar books/movies/performances/etc?
- Did the author do anything innovative or creative? If so, what?
- Was anything done exceptionally well? If so, what?
- Was anything done exceptionally badly? If so, what?
- What could have been done better? Are there any particular improvements you would have suggested?
- For book reviews, consider the writing. Was the book well organized? Were the sentences easy to follow and to understand?
- For movie reviews, consider people other than the director and actors who may have contributed to the film. In particular, think about costume designers, screenwriters, music directors, and cinematographers.
- For reviews of plays and other performances, consider people other than the director and actor who may have contributed to the performance. In particular, think about costume designers, set designers (and builders!), playwrights, music directors, and lighting directors.

A Sample Format for Reviews

Introduction

- Introduce the work fully (e.g., Author, title, publisher, year, # of pages).

- Briefly describe the kind of work being reviewed, its main subject, audience, purpose.
- Summarize your evaluation, especially any problem or question you will tackle later.

Section I

- Place the work into some context--that of the course, your own experience, or the academic discipline, in terms of the problem the work addresses.

Section II

- Summarize the main points of the work, using paraphrase and quotation to highlight the contents.
- Be sure to distinguish between your summary and your reaction to the text

Section III

- Evaluate the work by discussing it in terms of what you have learned about the subject from the course text and your own experience. Be critical; if you see problems with the author's argument or methods, note them.
- How do the categories it uses compare to those of the course text? Do they extend the categories, conflict with them, argue with them?
- How do the conclusions compare?

Conclusion

Synthesize the questions you raised in the previous section, so that you can place the work in the larger context of the issues raised by the course overall.