



## CRITICAL ANALYSIS

Students too often have the attitude that the printed word is gospel and that anyone who publishes a book is an “expert” whose views must not be questioned. It is important to realize at an early stage that every piece of writing contains views to which objections can be raised by an alert reader. Your aim as an academic writer is to learn to **read critically**.

### READING CRITICALLY

*While reading, ask yourself these questions...*

- Why did the author write this book/article?
- What **main themes, leading ideas, or proposals** is the author presenting? (The answers are often found in the preface and the introductory and concluding chapters).
- On the basis of your own experience and reading, what objections to his/her arguments can you think of?
- Are any arguments based on unsupported or questionable assumptions?
- Does the author sidestep or ignore counterarguments that might question the validity of his/her conclusions?
- If the author mentions some possible objections, has s/he taken adequate account of them, or has s/he considered them less important than you think they really are?
- If you agree with his/her point of view, what additional arguments can you think of to answer objections that might be raised?
- Pay attention to the year of publication. The time at which an author wrote may reveal much about the views he has presented. Ask yourself: do his/her arguments apply to the present situation?

### WRITING THE CRITICISM

- It is helpful to look at books or articles that oppose the views presented and to find out something about the background of the author, what else s/he has written, etc.
- If you have never written a criticism of this kind before, read one or two reviews of books on related subjects in any reputable periodical, such as an academic journal, or the review section of a serious newspaper or magazine.

### *The best criticisms...*

- Have focus and unity. All of your comments should be tied together into one or two main themes or points of view in concise, coherent and logical form:
  - Pick important but specific points or ideas for discussion. Otherwise, your reader will suspect that you didn't get much beyond the author's introduction.
  - You might even omit some of your criticism of minor points that the author has developed, which might make your review “choppy” and lacking in coherence.

- Avoid the temptation merely to summarize and to report what the author said:
  - Don't summarize the author's view in the first half of your criticism and then comment on them in the second half. While it is an acceptable procedure, and is tempting because it is so easy, it is dull for your reader and there are more imaginative approaches.
  - *The whole of your essay should be devoted to commenting critically on what the author has said.*
- Present the author's views as you go along as part of the process of commenting on them: the order in which you choose to present arguments helps you make your own points stronger.

### **Other options:**

- The review need not be all devoted to criticism or recommendation of what the author has said. You can also include a discussion of the important problems raised in the book based on *your own* reading and knowledge. You may want to relate the arguments to something that has happened recently, or to another "hook" to interest your reader.

### **GENERAL TIPS:**

- Be specific and precise. Always explaining exactly what you mean and adding relevant information will help you build up a concise essay packed with specific content rather than generalizations.
- Avoid judgment sentences like "The author is very knowledgeable and has written an interesting book" or "In summary, I think this is a really good/bad book". If you want to express these sentiments, *be very specific*: "The author's new findings on medieval studio procedures make this book an important resource."

### **QUOTING:**

- *When presenting the author's arguments*, you should only directly quote ideas that you believe have never been expressed so well by any other author. Otherwise, paraphrase or summarize them. You don't want to use up too much space quoting from the book.
- *When criticizing the author's arguments*, however, it is useful to quote statements that you intend to assess directly. Quoting the author on a contentious point will help you be faithful to the author's real argument (and to avoid the temptation of exaggerating it to fit into your critique).<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> 1999 Writing Tutorial Service, Carleton University