



Critical review writing

What is a Critical Review?

A critical review is an **evaluation** of an academic text eg: an article, report, essay or book. You are asked to make judgments, positive or negative, about the text using various **criteria**. The information and knowledge in the text needs to be evaluated, and the **criteria** that should be used can vary depending on your discipline. That is, management, sociology, information technology, or literature may use different criteria. All critical reviews, however, involve **two main tasks**: summary and evaluation.

Summary / Description:

A description of the text:

- The **topic**, or the main **question** it proposes to answer.
- Why does the author think the **question(s)** is important?
- The **arguments** (answers with reasons) that it makes.
- The **structure** of the text or the **method** used to answer the question.
- The **evidence** used to support answers.
- The **conclusions** reached in the text.
- Any **further questions** raised, but not answered in the text.

Be careful not to give too much detail, especially in a short review.



Evaluation / Judgement:

YOUR judgment about the quality or value of the text (for other researchers, or to practitioners in the field, or to students).

An evaluation of the text using **criteria**, appropriate to your discipline.

When evaluating the text you could answer some of the following questions. The underlined terms are possible **criteria**:

- Is the question the text tries to answer relevant, interesting, new, useful?
- Who will find the text useful?
- Does the text give new answers to an old question?
- Is the text detailed, or brief? Simple or complex?
- Is the evidence presented to support the answer extensive? Strong? Weak? Contradictory?
- Are the conclusions reached final, or preliminary?

Process of writing a review:

1. Skim read the text – note the main question or questions the text tries to answer and the main answers it gives.
2. Think of evaluation criteria. Talk about the text and criteria with classmates.
3. Read the text again and note the important points in detail such as the subject, question, arguments and/or evidence, and conclusions made, and your evaluation using your criteria.
4. Read related texts, note differences, similarities.
5. Outline critical review, matching points of description with evaluation criteria.
6. Start writing review.

Structure of a critical review

Title: usually looks like an entry in a bibliography.

Kotter, J 1990, 'What Leaders Really Do', *Harvard Business Review*, vol. 68, no. 3, p. 103.

Introduction should contain:

- A general overview of the topic or question(s) of the text.
- Your evaluation of the importance of the topic or question.
- An explanation of how the critical review will be organised.

Leadership is different from management and this article provides a clear, cogent explanation of the difference.
(From Coyle 2000)

Body of Critical Review should contain:

1. Summary / description of the text.

Kotter examines the difference between leadership and management across three major sets of tasks: setting direction versus planning and budgeting; aligning people versus organisation and staffing; and motivating versus controlling and problem solving.

(Adapted from Coyle 2000)

2. Evaluation of the text. (note underlined criteria used)

Kotter's insights, tools, and ideas for action are relevant but the need for more insight is great. [you should explain why in more detail]

(From Coyle 2000)

You may not always feel you are able to judge whether the argument in a text is correct or not. It may be useful to explain first how the arguments given in the text are the same, or different from arguments given in other texts on the same topic. Then, if they are different, explain which argument you find more convincing and why.

Like Mintzberg, Kotter concludes that the jobs of a manager and a leader are not filled with neatly segmented tasks such as planning or organising.

(From Gibson 1999)

It may be necessary to read widely about a topic before making judgments.

Conclusion:

Critical reviews don't always need a conclusion so you must decide whether to include one or not. If you think a conclusion is necessary it should reiterate your overall view of the text.

In sum, this is some of Kotter's best work. It is a good resource for the practising manager who wants a quick and reliable, even practical source of information on what constitutes effective leadership today.

(Adapted from Gibson 1999)

Sources:

Coyle, J. 2000, 'John P. Kotter on What Leaders Really Do', *Human Resource Planning*, vol. 23, no. 1, p.45.
Gibson, JW 1999, 'John Kotter on What Leaders Really Do', *Organizational Dynamics*, vol. 28, no. 2, p.90.

Useful references:

<http://www.monash.edu.au/lls/llonline/writing/general/essay/sample-essay/> analyses the **language of critique** in a sample essay
<http://www.eng.fju.edu.tw/ron/comcon/crit/criticalr.htm> for a breakdown of a critical review