

How to Write a Critical Review (Anthropology and International Development)

This is a guide to assist students when undertaking a ‘critical review’ or ‘critical analysis’ activity as part of an assessment in a course for Anthropology or International Development. This guide has primarily been designed for students who have been asked to undertake a critical film and/or critical journal review based on course readings and materials. However, this may also be a useful resource for students who are looking to improve their critical essay writing skills more generally.

This guide will henceforth refer to the ‘text’ being reviewed and/or analysed. However, it is important to note that this information is also relevant when it comes to non-textual resources such as films, photographs, audio content etc.

Don’t be afraid to write in the first person when undertaking a critical review and/or doing critical analysis. A useful guide for writing in the first person is available [here](#).

What is the purpose of a critical review?

‘Critical review’ refers to the process of summarising and evaluating a particular text such as a film, article, visual or aural content. The purpose of a critical review is to evaluate this text in order to increase the reader’s understanding of it. A critical review expresses the writer’s point of view, in light of the prescribed text, and their broader knowledge of the key themes and course content. In doing so, it is important to provide a balanced assessment, taking into consideration the strengths and weaknesses of the text being reviewed.

What does being ‘critical’ mean?

Being ‘critical’ does not always mean being negative or disagreeing with the premise of a particular text. Instead, being ‘critical’ refers to the act of questioning information, arguments or content presented in a text and offering an evaluation of it (UNSW 2015). In order to think and write ‘critically’ it is necessary to understand the text from a range of different perspectives, which includes engaging with the theories, approaches, frameworks or arguments that have discussed throughout the course.

Being critical involves:

(i) questioning assumptions, (ii) providing a balanced assessment, and (iii) drawing a conclusion. Drawing your own conclusion and/or taking a stance on a particular text requires confidence, and is not always an easy task for inexperienced writers.

How to Write a Critical Review (Anthropology and International Development)

The ability to think and write critically is an important skill for students at university, particularly for students of anthropology and/or international development, for whom it is important to highlight the nuance and complexity inherent in these disciplines and challenge some of the assumptions made.

Critical vs Descriptive

A critical review or analysis is characterised by two main types of writing: (i) writing descriptively to summarise the particular arguments or concepts of a text, and (ii) writing critically in order to evaluate and/or analyse these arguments and concepts. It is necessary for a critical review to contain some descriptive writing in order to summarise the text however, it is important that a review is more than just descriptive. It is important to strike a balance between these two components.

Descriptive writing is characterised by setting the scene and describing the text (University of Leicester 2009). Descriptive writing is not about developing an argument, but instead focuses on setting the background or context within which your argument can be developed. As such, descriptive writing is relatively simple. However, the challenge is to make sure that the descriptive aspect of your review does not take up too much of your word count, and that enough space is left for your critique. A submission which only contains descriptive writing will earn few marks, as it will be assumed that you are treating claims made in the text as if they are the objective truth, which may not always be the case. If you have received feedback that your writing is not critical enough, it likely means that your writing is weighted too heavily in favour of this descriptive summary.

When writing descriptively it is important to avoid presenting a laundry-list of points. Instead, focus on the points in the text that you find the most interesting or most significant and attempt to summarise the main ideas or arguments.

Critical writing is characterised by:

- Confident refusal to accept conclusions of others without evaluating the evidence provided;
- Balanced representation of reasons why the conclusions of others may be accepted or should be treated with caution;
- Clear presentation of your own evidence and/or argument, leading to a conclusion;
- and
- Recognition of the limitations of your own evidence, argument and/or conclusion.

How to Write a Critical Review (Anthropology and International Development)

(University of Leicester 2009).

Critical writing is about engaging in, or generating, debate. This type of writing can be tricky and so, requires a degree of confidence in order to weigh up the arguments of others and also formulate your own. It can be tempting to form your argument by stringing together quotes from the text. However, it is important to make sure that you are explaining the relevance of any quotes you are using, discussing their validity and demonstrating how they relate to the task (University of Leicester 2009).

Examples: Descriptive writing

“This text is divided into two parts. Firstly...”

“The author challenges the notion that...”

“The text begins with a short overview of...”

“The intended audience for this text is...”

“The text examines the...”

“The approach taken by the author provides the opportunity to examine...”

Examples: Critical writing

“The suggestions made by the author are difficult to support.”

“The author does not seem to take into consideration...”

“This text proves to be significant / timely due to...”

“A detailed, well-researched and rigorous account of...”

“This argument is not entirely convincing as...”

“Several crucial questions are left unanswered, such as...”

How to do a critical review

The first step of a critical review is a critical reading, or watching of, or listening to the text you are being asked to review, making sure to take appropriate notes. It is important to think about the questions that the text is trying to answer, but also any questions that the text raises for you as you are reviewing it (Monash University 2017).

Make sure you read, watch or listen critically. It is not enough to simply understand what the author is saying: it is essential to challenge it. Examine how the text is structured, the types of reasons or evidence used to support the conclusions, any theoretical or methodological frameworks that are employed, and whether the author is reliant on underlying assumptions or potential bias. Take copious notes that reflect what the text means AND what you think about it.

How to Write a Critical Review (Anthropology and International Development)

The second step of a critical review is to write it!

Critical reviews are typically structured as follows:

When structuring your critical review you should allocate about 10% of the word count each for the introduction and conclusion. For example, if you have been asked to write a 2000 word review, your introduction and conclusion should be approximately 200 words each. The remaining 80% of the word count should be devoted to the body of your review, where the bulk of your description and critique should take place. This should be separated into a number of evenly-weighted paragraphs, each devoted to the discussion of one key theme or argument.

Depending on the nature of the text, and your preferred writing style, there are a couple of options for structuring the body of your review. Firstly, you could split it into two parts with the first part providing a summary of the text and the second part providing a critique. Alternatively, you could offer a series of combined summary and critique paragraphs on a point-by-point basis. Give careful consideration to the structure of your review, particularly if you are working with a shorter word count. It is important to allocate sufficient space for your critique and avoid repetition.

Some useful questions to ask

As part of the critical review process, it can be useful to ask some questions of the text you are reviewing. For example:

- To what extent does the text make an original contribution?
- Is the text logical?
- What is the validity of the evidence and/or theoretical framework presented?
- Is the text thorough or comprehensive?
- Is anything important omitted from the text?
- Are the main points and/or arguments described clearly and fully?
- Could the findings from the text be interpreted in any other way?
- Do the author(s) ignore something that might be important?
- Is the text appropriate for the intended audience?
- Is the question the text tries to answer relevant, interesting, new or useful?
- Does the text give new answers or interpretations to an old question?
- Is the text biased in any way?
- Do you agree with the text? Why? Why not?
- Is the text detailed or brief? Simple or complex?

How to Write a Critical Review (Anthropology and International Development)

- What is the nature of the evidence provided? Is it strong, weak, relevant, persuasive or contradictory?
(Monash University 2017).

References

Monash University (2017) Writing a Critical Review: Quick Study Guide, available online <https://www.monash.edu/rlo/quick-study-guides/writing-a-critical-review>

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The University of Adelaide (2014b) Writing Article Reviews & Annotated Bibliographies, available online <https://www.adelaide.edu.au/writingcentre/docs/learningguide-writingreviewsbibliographies.pdf>

University of Leicester (2009) What is critical writing? available online <https://www2.le.ac.uk/offices/ld/resources/study-guides-pdfs/writing-skills-pdfs/critical-writing-v1%200.pdf>

University of New South Wales (UNSW) (2015) Writing a Critical Review (online) <https://student.unsw.edu.au/writing-critical-review>