

What is a “critique” ?

In many university assignments, you are asked to critique, or to critically review, discuss or analyse. Each of these tasks has a different purpose and requires a slightly different approach, even within the same discipline. Amongst different disciplines, the approaches will vary even more.

There are, however, some common elements or tasks of critiquing:

In essence, a critique requires you to use the concepts or criteria valued in your discipline to:

- **analyse** - i.e. to clarify or “make sense of” ideas.
This is likely to require you to identify ideas, to show how these ideas are related, and to identify alternative ideas.
- **evaluate** - i.e. to assess the worth or significance of ideas.
This requires you to evaluate ideas and develop a substantiated point of view about the ideas.

Critique, or review, a book or article	<i>e.g. Critically review a journal article of your choice.</i>
Critically review the literature on a particular topic	<i>e.g. Write an essay, based on a critical literature review, on the implications of the concept of sustainable development for environmental planning and management.</i>
Critically discuss (or review or analyse) a statement	<i>e.g. “The world is moving into a phase where landscape design may well be recognised as the most comprehensive of the arts” (Jellicoe, 1975). Critically review this statement in the light of contemporary developments in design theory.</i>
Critically review (or discuss or analyse) a particular concept, issue or topic	<i>e.g. Critically analyse the strengths and weaknesses of markets. Discuss critically the meaning of strategic and tactical decisions. Critically review the historical background to the introduction of the Resource Management Act, highlighting the key factors leading to change.</i>

What features might you focus on ?

To analyse and evaluate, you need to ask many different questions about the topic you are reviewing or critiquing.

These questions might be such features as:

- theoretical or conceptual framework underpinning the texts
- arguments or key points in the texts
- assumptions underlying the writer’s argument
- evidence used to support arguments
- method used to gather or analyse data
- significance & contribution of the argument

If you are reviewing an article or other piece of writing, you might also ask questions about:

- structure and organisation of the writing
- language & style of the writing

Processes and tasks in critiquing

Different disciplines ask different types of questions when critiquing. The questions you might ask of an empirical study, for instance, would be quite different to those you would ask about a landscape design.

The list below is intended to start you thinking about the kinds of questions you might ask in your discipline. You should use other sources in your discipline to extend the range of questions and narrow their focus.

1. Identify ideas	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ what is the key theme or purpose?▪ what important points or arguments are presented?▪ what are the key concepts?▪ what methodologies are used?
2. Make connections	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ what theoretical framework does the text fit in?▪ what are the links between theories and examples?▪ what is the relative weighting or emphasis of ideas?▪ what evidence is used to support points?▪ what assumptions are made?▪ how are the ideas linked to the wider body of knowledge?▪ what are the implications of the ideas?
3. Examine from different perspectives	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ what alternative arguments are there?▪ what other interpretations are there?▪ what other approaches or conceptual frameworks are there?
4. Challenge or evaluate <i>(Remember – “critique” involves pointing out strengths as well as weaknesses.)</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ how appropriate is the research design?▪ how reliable is the evidence?▪ how valid are the assumptions?▪ how balanced is the argument?▪ how clear and unambiguous is the writing?▪ what is the contribution or significance?
5. Develop a substantiated point of view or position	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ having gone through the steps 1 to 4, what is your “point of view” or position about the topic?

Useful resources

To find out more about critical analysis in general, you could start with some of the sources below.

For a basic introduction:

Knott, D. (2008) *Critical reading towards critical writing*. Retrieved May 21, 2008 from University of Toronto Web site: <http://www.utoronto.ca/writing/critrdg.html>

Massey University. (2007). *Critical Reading*. Retrieved May 21, 2008 from Massey University Web site: http://owll.massey.ac.nz/sd_critical_reading.html

University of South Australia. (2005). *Writing article reviews*. Retrieved May 21, 2008 from University of South Australia Web site: <http://www.unisanet.unisa.edu.au/learningconnection/student/learningAdvisors/article.asp>

Vossler, K. (2006). How to write a book review. In P. Adams, R. Openshaw, & V. Trembath (Eds.), *Score more: essential academic skills for tertiary education* (pp. 216-219). Melbourne, Victoria: Thomson Dunmore Press.

For more detail:

Craswell, G. (2005). *Writing for academic success: A postgraduate guide*. London: Sage. (pp. 31-38, 114-117)

Wallace, M. & Wray, A. (2006). *Critical reading and writing for postgraduates*. London: Sage Publications.

To find out more about critical analysis in your discipline, ask your lecturer or one of the Information Studies librarians to recommend sources.