

CRITICAL REVIEWS

Use this sheet to help you:

- conduct a critical review of an article
- structure and write a critical review

5 minute self test

Circle either 'should' or 'shouldn't' in the points below:

In a critical review, you:

1. **should / shouldn't** assume the reader is familiar with the text
2. **should / shouldn't** provide a summary of the text
3. **should / shouldn't** provide many quotes
4. **should / shouldn't** be 'hyper-critical'
5. **should / shouldn't** write an introduction, a body and a conclusion

Check your answers on Page 10

CRITICAL REVIEWS

Introduction

The process of critically reviewing an article can seem intimidating. How, you may worry, can you think of things to say about an article written by an expert? What if you can't find anything to "criticise"? How will you avoid just producing a summary of the article? And, how should you structure the review?

There are no simple techniques that can make writing a critical review easy. A critical review is something that takes time, care and thought. Perhaps, for hours and hours, you may feel you are getting, nowhere, but then suddenly, maybe while in the bath, you have an idea...

The purpose of this helpsheet is to provide you with an approach that can help you get ideas and give you a sense of how to structure and write the review. You may find the two examples at the end of this helpsheet to be useful.

Writing a critical review in 10 steps

Step 1

Skim the article you have to review to gain a general idea of what it is about. This process should take you about five minutes or less.

Step 2

Discuss the article with someone else. Write down general ideas or themes. Discussing the article may clarify your understanding and trigger some initial ideas.

Step 3

Read it again. This time, highlight sections which seem important, or better still, take notes of the important details. (The important things are the subject/s of the article, the conclusion/s of the writer and the arguments and/or data that the writer provides in order to reach his or her conclusion/s.)

Now check your notes with someone else. Note differences and similarities in the points you have written down. If there are major differences, go back and check the article.

Step 4

Check the main points with the article once more. Make sure your notes 'agree' with the points raised by the writer. (You should be able to point to evidence from the text to confirm that your notes are accurate.) Write out a quick "flow" diagram of the article which covers the main points of each paragraph. The point of the diagram should be to show the relationships between the main points in the article.

Step 5

Have a long, hard think about the article. Put the article aside and just think about what you have read. Good critical review writing does not take five minutes. It requires careful and clear thinking.

CRITICAL REVIEWS

Step 6

Read your notes again and look at the diagram you have made. Can you think of any criticisms that you have about the article? (These may include questions, disagreements, doubts, etc.) You are not criticising the author here, just the points he or she has raised. These criticisms could relate to the:

- theoretical claims
- evidence
- case method
- statistical support
- use of other writers' arguments, etc

Now, can you think of anything you agree with in the article? Perhaps you can think of a further application of one of the writer's ideas, for example. Any strong response that you have to the article is generally useful. When you have finished, check your criticisms and agreements with those of another person.

Step 7

Now begin to write your introduction to the review. This should be about 10% of the total review. It should be short and should be largely in your own words. (Use the helpsheet Language for Citing to help you.) You will need to include in the introduction:

- a general overview of the article
- an overview of your review (your approach to the article)
- an anticipation of your conclusion (what will you say about the major ideas expressed in the article).

In introducing the article, you should also mention:

- the author's name
- the title of the article

You should also reference the article using a conventional referencing system (a complete reference list should be included at the end of your review).

Below is a guide only; details have been left out

In this paper, I will discuss Pierre Ryckmans' article 'On the University' (*give reference*). Ryckmans' article is about (*say what it is about*). In particular, he argues that (*give a list of the main points*). After summarising Ryckmans' main points, I shall be claiming that (*give a general overview of your main criticisms—don't give any details here*). In concluding, I shall show that (*give a quick outline of your conclusion about the subject*).

Compare your version with the version of another person. It should be similar in structure but not in the details. Everyone's review should be slightly different.

CRITICAL REVIEWS

Step 8

Now you need to write the body of the review. This must consist of summary and criticism sections in roughly equal proportions. The body could be written in either of these forms:

Option 1

Summary of 1st point then criticism of 1st point

Summary of 2nd point then: criticism of 2nd point, etc....

or

Option 2

Summary of main points of whole article then:

Criticism of main points of the whole article

The important thing is that you balance your criticisms with an adequate summary of the author's work.

Things to remember

You do need to show that you have read the article, so giving quotations from the article is useful here. But don't make the quotations too long, and don't quote too much! You should quote only when you can't say a point better in your own words. You may also quote from the article when you are trying to show the reader that the writer did in fact say something (and you are not making this up). A quote should not normally exceed three lines of text.

Make sure that you summarise the main points in the article fully. If the writer has one major theme and seven sub-themes, your summary should show this. Don't just say "X says that.... but I think that...." This is boring and superficial! Get into the details of the work and spell out each point fully using your own examples where possible. If you can think of implications which you think follow from the ideas, spell these out too. However, make it clear when you are summarising the writer's ideas and when you are using your own ideas! (See helpsheet: Language for Citing).

When spelling out the points fully, don't assume that the reader has read the article and knows what you are talking about. Your review should stand on its own. The reader should be able to get a reasonably full understanding of the contents of the article without actually having to read it!

Don't be afraid to criticise the text. If you think that a point is wrong, say so and give reasons. Equally though, don't be hyper-critical. If you agree with point X, but disagree with point Y, say so. Or if you agree with a point but only to a certain extent, say so. In fact, a good part of your summary should be devoted to distinguishing points which have merit and those which don't. Remember: no article is perfect in all respects!

CRITICAL REVIEWS

The body should be 80% of your review. Devote at least one paragraph to each main point and use topic sentences, examples, elaborations and concluding sentences in each paragraph. You should easily be able to write one page. Don't pad out the body section. If you can't think of anything to say, go back to your notes or read the article again.

Use critical review language, almost to the point of excess. (See helpsheet: Language for Citing) The language will keep you on the track of writing a critical review and not simply a summary. Try to use at least two critical review phrases in each paragraph.

Use connectors also. ('Firstly' 'Secondly' 'Moreover' 'Furthermore' 'On the other hand' etc.,) Remember to guide the reader through the body of your review. The reader should never have to ask themselves "where is all this going?"

The body of the review is the place for solid details and argument. Take it seriously and write as fully as you can.

Step 9

After you have written the body of the review, you need to write the conclusion. This should be about 10% of the review and should include a brief recap of the main points raised in the review, noting specifically where you have agreed and disagreed with the writer. The conclusion might also give your suggestions for further research work, or the contexts in which the work you have reviewed can be used.

Once again, an example is given below. Note the change in tense.

In this review I have discussed Ryckmans' article 'On the University'. Ryckmans' article covers several points (*give list*). I have argued that while he is right that (*give examples of where you agree with him*), this does not mean that (*give your criticisms*). Further development and discussion of this issue especially in the area of (*give details*) is needed to advance research on these matters.

Step 10

Leave your critique on your desk for a week or two before looking at it again. Carefully edit and proofread it before submitting it. (See helpsheet: Editing and Proofreading.)

CRITICAL REVIEWS

Two examples

For further comparison, we attach a critical view of a book in Management and another of a book in Economics. The first is reviewed by Professor David Merrett, the second is reviewed by Professor Gary Magee.

The first is a very positive review. Note that a critique is not always negative. The second review is more balanced in its appraisal. Note the use of critical review language (bold, italic).

Critical review example 1

In this review I will discuss the book *Corporate Governance and Sustainable Prosperity* (2002) edited by William Lazonick and Mary O'Sullivan. ***I shall agree with the editors*** that shareholder-value-driven corporate governance is incompatible with sustainable prosperity.

The theme of this well researched and powerfully argued volume is that corporate governance matters and that the new fashion of maximizing shareholder value may be a road to ruin. ***This book is of great interest*** to business historians because its arguments resonate with Chandlerian issues about differences in national business systems and long run economic performance.

In the first half of the last century the United States model of competitive managerial capitalism triumphed over the British and German models in that U.S. firms came to dominate world markets in a range of industries. ***The story told by Lazonick and O'Sullivan is set half a century later***, when the United States is losing, not winning. High-tech manufacturing firms are ceding market share at home and abroad to new competitors, most notably from Japan. U.S. managers have sought to maintain earnings, and the value of their stock options, by downsizing and outsourcing.

The nine chapters, five of which are written by the editors singly or jointly, cover four interconnected issues. ***The first*** is the paradox of sustained economic growth in the United States in the last half of the 1990s and a widening inequality in the distribution of earnings, worsening job security, and lowered benefits. ***Lazonick and O'Sullivan raise*** the broad issues in their admirable introduction. Philip Moss's carefully crafted chapter thoroughly reviews the data and offers a powerful critique of the explanations put forward by economists. ***He argues*** that the changing patterns of earnings distributions, job tenure and entitlements cannot be solely explained with reference to "market responses to exogenous supply and demand forces" as they also reflect decisions made by managers in the light of the "changes ... in strategy, behavior and organization *inside of firms*" (p.212, emphasis in original).

His contention is supported by three excellent case studies of U.S. high-tech industries that are struggling in the face of foreign competition. Robert Forrant's chapter on the machine-tool industry, Beth Almelda's on the jet-engine industry and Chris Tilly and Michael Handel's on medical diagnostic-imaging equipment all show that the overwhelming response of managers to declining competitiveness has been to cut costs by outsourcing, automating and, above all, stripping skilled workers from the shop floor.

Why do managers from widely different industries follow the same path? ***Lazonick and O'Sullivan provide a spirited explanation*** in their chapter entitled "Maximizing Shareholder Value: A New Ideology for Corporate Governance". In brief, the issue is who controls the allocation of corporate resources: insiders or the market?

CRITICAL REVIEWS

The authors' preference is unequivocal: insiders can make better decisions than the market which takes too short-term a perspective. The virtue of relegating authority to insiders is that they can retain and retrain resources in ways that may lead to sustained innovation and competitive advantage, rather than divesting labor and capital back into the market for reallocation. **Lazonick expands on this idea** in his chapter "Organizational Learning and International Competitiveness: The Skill-Base Hypothesis". To build and take advantage of their firm's knowledge base, **Lazonick argues**, managers need to design structures that integrate both functional and hierarchical areas. This enables learning that is a collective and cumulative process, stretching over long periods of time. Skilled workers on the shop floor are a critical ingredient in these processes. Laying them off may help earnings by cutting costs but it undermines the longer-term capacity of the firm to innovate.

Managers of U.S. manufacturing firms adopted strategies that successfully retained and retrained workers up to the 1970s. In separate chapters, **Lazonick and O'Sullivan argue** that Japanese and German corporations, respectively, have continued to follow this course up to the present, although pressures are intensifying in both countries to adopt the model that would maximize shareholder value. Managers were able to retain a degree of independence from the stockholders because of their reliance on retained earnings in the United States, or, in Japan and Germany on committed funding from the banking system which took a longer-term view of performance. Insiders lost control as a confluence of forces gave rise to the emergence of a new model of corporate governance in the 1980s and 1990s. These included the rise of free-market ideology, deregulation of financial markets, an explosion of debt financing that leveraged earnings, mergers and acquisitions, leveraged buyouts and management buyouts, shifts in household savings from fixed interest to market-based securities, the rise of institutional investors, and issues relating to the provision of retirement incomes for aging populations with rising life expectancies. Owners or outsiders increasingly set the rules for the allocation of corporate resources. Managers, **as O'Sullivan drolly observes**, "with appropriate incentives for self-enrichment [became] ardent proponents of shareholder value" (p.294).

Is this form of shareholder-value-driven corporate governance compatible with sustainable prosperity? **Lazonick and O'Sullivan make a strong case** that it might not be. **The threats come from two directions. First, the** loss of well-paid jobs to boost corporate earnings can have a negative effect on consumption demand. The widening inequalities of income and wealth associated with the substitution of capital and low-skilled workers for skilled workers could lead to a decrease in consumption and weaken social cohesion. The possibility of shareholder value becoming the overriding goal of management in Japan and Germany poses serious challenges to their existing social and political structures. **Second, firms** that choose to downsize and distribute their surplus assets through the market may seriously impair their ability to innovate in the longer term. **The case studies provide a strong argument that U.S. firms** in machine tools, jet engines and medical-imaging equipment would not easily win back the advantages they had lost to firms from countries where managers practice retain-and-retrain strategies to a greater degree. The new alliance between managers and shareholders that is transforming business behavior in many advanced economies may have been struck a body blow by the current scandals of falsified corporate earnings and flawed audit standards.

CRITICAL REVIEWS

Critical review example 2

The Record of Global Economic Development, by Eric Jones (Edward Elgar, 2002), pp. xviii + 226.

This review discusses Eric Jones' book *The Record of Global Economic Development*. **I shall claim** that while the book is a very valuable text for a number of reasons, **Jones does not make the case** for the use of English as a global language.

According to Eric Jones two recent events have underlined the deficiencies of economics as it is currently taught and practised. **The first was** the failure of almost all experts to predict the Asian crisis; **the other is** the inability of the discipline, despite all of the evidence in its favour, to convince communities around the world of the benefits of globalisation. **Jones argues that** both failures have their roots in the same place: modern Western economics' decision not to take the study of institutional and historical context seriously. **Without an understanding of such considerations, it is maintained**, one cannot hope to comprehend adequately the real-world forces at play in the global economy. **His appeal for** a better appreciation of the role that economic history can play in the training of economists, **however, is not that of an academic, embittered by the lack of attention he feels is his right. Jones is too much the scholar to make that mistake. He knows that** the only way to convince non-economic historians of the subject's worth is to demonstrate it. *The Record of Global Economic Development* is his latest attempt to do this. **As he makes clear in his preface, the main aim of this book** is to explore the processes of economic development and cultural, institutional and structural change so as 'to illustrate historical and modern patterns, and to some extent integrate them' (p. vii).

If the proof of the history pudding is in the eating, then, it must be said that in this instance the eating is not facilitated by the structure of the book. Despite attempts to impose a unifying framework in the preface, much of the book reads more like a series of stand alone papers than a coherent thesis. To a large extent, this is a reflection of the book's origins as in part a series of lectures delivered by the author in Japan in 2000 and in part as a collection of essays written since 1991.

The first part of the book focuses on very long-run economic development. Those who know Jones' earlier work in the *European Miracle and Growth Recurring* will be familiar with the terrain. **Indeed, much of what is written represents** a condensed recapitulation of his main thesis and response to his critics. Those uninitiated to the field of long-run economic change will find these chapters a very useful and entertaining introduction. **Although Jones' account of the rise of West and the patterns of growth in world history is in fact a richly layered one, emphasis here is overwhelming placed upon the political determinants of growth.** In particular, open, competitive political systems that protect liberty and property, encourage the rule of law and innovation, while limiting rent-seeking are those that in the long run have flourished historically. The lesson of history for the developing country is that above all else, it should 'put the law above politics' and 'free its information markets' (p. 46).

The main intellectual contribution of this book, however, is Jones' restatement of the relationship between economic growth and institutions in the pre-modern world. Here, he argues that it was the stock of institutions such as contract law and information markets that had accumulated over centuries that mattered most to the success of Europe, a success, of course, that only became quantitatively apparent in the nineteenth century when growth rates actually accelerated. **To assume that nothing of importance happened before 1850 as Williamson, O'Rourke and others have recently reasserted, therefore, is to miss the most important part of the picture. As Jones puts it,** 'the stock of institutions can possess or retain the potential to operate usefully even if it is not currently doing so or long before its scope has been widened to encompass the whole population' (p. 10). **This is an important and valid point, though one suspects that, just as Jones himself does not buy a similar argument when it is evoked by those who** espouse the primacy of the cultural determinants of growth, the 'quantifiers' are unlikely to be convinced of its veracity. **For that to happen, the links between earlier institutional change and later economic growth will need to be spelled out more clearly than they are in this volume.**

CRITICAL REVIEWS

Jones' take on economic development is essentially an optimistic one. The record of the last forty years is one of unprecedented progress. Moreover, once appropriate institutional and political conditions have been developed, there is no reason why sustained growth cannot be ultimately attained anywhere, irrespective of cultural considerations. **This confidence flows over into the case studies that dominate the latter half of the book.** A survey of the history of retailing in Australia emphasises how the unfettered market has been able to meet the constantly changing shopping needs of consumers. The challenges posed to growth by the advent of new forms of protectionism – multifunctionality and cultural protectionism – can be defeated by educating the public of their lack of foundation in reality. **One can also detect in his account of the failings of Australian business a** confidence that they too will be ultimately able to embrace the changes needed to be successful in the expanding global market for cultural and knowledge-based services.

Perhaps, the bravest part of the book is its foray into the emotive world of language diversity. For many, language is integral to cultural identity. **Jones challenges this notion** and makes the case for the adoption of a single, global language. **His argument is that** because the primary function of language is to transmit information, by teaching and artificially preserving the multiplicity of languages that exist, societies are not only wasting resources, but imposing barriers that limit their own citizens access to the global market. The greatest good would be served simply by settling on a common language. Most economists would not have many qualms about the logic of his case. **Somewhat more contentious, however, is the choice of lingua franca. Jones argues that** the market has already made its decision: 'Among the major languages, English currently reigns supreme and the network externalities that arise from this mean that its use should be encouraged' (p. 92). **He may be right, but the problem with network** externalities is that they can lead to suboptimal outcomes. **How do we know that English is the right choice?** Other than briefly stating that English has one of the largest vocabularies of all languages and houses the largest single stock of knowledge in the world, **Jones makes no detailed case for the desirability of that language over others.** Given that other languages would almost certainly have a case to put – what about the 1.3 billion Standard Chinese speakers? – **this is an oversight. Moreover, the debate itself may turn out to be moot one,** simply because no single current language may come to dominate. **Another possibility is that** a new language, perhaps an amalgam of a number of existing languages, may arise to fulfil the function.

The Record of Global Economic Development is an impressive work, rich with ideas and breathtaking in scope. Its knowledgeable and seemingly effortless coverage of a wide variety of subjects alone is a mark of the imposing scholarship embodied in it. **It deserves to be** widely read. **Whether this book will contribute to the changing of attitudes towards economic history is ultimately left up to readers to decide. This reviewer for one, however, certainly hopes it will.**

CRITICAL REVIEWS

Answers

5 minute self test

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1. should / **shouldn't** assume the reader is familiar with the text
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3. should / **shouldn't** provide many quotes
4. should / **shouldn't** be 'hyper-critical'
5. **should** / shouldn't write an introduction, a body and a conclusion

References

Lazonick, W. & O'Sullivan, M, (eds) (2002) *Corporate Governance and Sustainable Prosperity*. Basingstoke, U.K.: Palgrave, 2002.
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