

Planning and writing a critical review

The following are general guidelines on writing a critical review of an article.

Do note that it is a good idea to check with your lecturer about specific requirements in your subject area as these may vary.

What is a critical review?

A critical review (sometimes called a critique, critical commentary, critical appraisal, critical analysis) is a detailed commentary on and critical evaluation of a text. You might carry out a critical review as a stand-alone exercise, or as part of your research and preparation for writing a literature review. The following guidelines are designed to help you critically evaluate a research article.

What is meant by critical?

To be critical does not mean to criticise in an exclusively negative manner. To be critical of a text means you question the information and opinions in the text, in an attempt to evaluate or judge its worth overall.

What is meant by evaluation?

An evaluation is an assessment of the strengths and weaknesses of a text. This should relate to specific criteria, in the case of a research article. You have to understand the purpose of each section, and be aware of the type of information and evidence that are needed to make it convincing, before you can judge its overall value to the research article as a whole.

Each section of a research article has a particular job to do in the article. You need to be clear what each section is meant to do, before you can weigh up how effectively it actually does it.

The sections of the research article

This guide presents an outline of what each section of a research article should achieve, and suggests questions you can use to help you think critically about each section before you evaluate the article as a whole.

You do not have to be an expert in the field to start to critically evaluate a research article. As you gain experience, you will become more critical, but it is still possible to question and evaluate a text in the early stages of your studies.

The abstract

The abstract should provide a very concise overview or summary of the research – what was done and why, the methods used, and the key results and recommendations.

- Is there an abstract?
- Does it provide a concise overview of the research?
- Does it identify the research problem?
- Does it outline the methods used, main findings and recommendations?

The introduction and literature review

The **introduction** may be part of the literature review itself. It should clearly state the aim of the research, and give a brief rationale for this.

The **literature review** should provide a background to the study by examining and evaluating other research in the area. It should synthesise this to help identify the need for the new research that is being presented. It should be organised clearly, and provide a balance of related and recent literature.

- Is the problem clearly identified?
- Is a rationale given for the research?
- Is the literature up to date?
- Is the literature relevant to the research?
- Does the literature present a balanced view?
- Does the literature identify a need for the research proposed?
- Are there any gaps in the topics of the literature reviewed?

Methodology

This section should present clearly and concisely the precise way in which the research was carried out, and why that method was chosen.

In other words, each aspect of the method – sampling, analysing, interviewing – must be explained so that someone else could carry out the same research, and they must also be justified. Why was one method used rather than another? Why were 7 people interviewed, not more or fewer? Evidence should be used to support the choice of methodology.

When you are evaluating this section, it helps to think about looking for gaps – what information has **not** been provided – and explain why you think it would have been useful or important.

Are the methods consistent with qualitative or quantitative research?
Is the approach clearly stated?
Are the methods clearly explained and justified?
Are important details provided, so that the research could be replicated by someone else?
Are details of data collection clearly described and justified?
Are any ethical considerations described and explained?

Results/findings

The results or findings of the study should be presented clearly and consistently, in line with the stated aim of the research.

The results are not commented on or analysed at this stage, but should be fully presented, using visual methods if appropriate, such as graphs or tables.

There should not be any 'gaps' in the results, and if there is any absence of relevant data, due to circumstances beyond the control of the researcher, the gap should be explained so that the reader is fully aware of the context.

Are the results presented clearly and consistently?
Are any graphs or tables clearly presented and coherent?
Is sufficient detail provided?
Are any gaps in the data-gathering accounted for?

Analysis/discussion

In this section, the researcher provides some interpretation of the findings. This should include an evaluation of the strengths and weaknesses of the findings, as well as of their general significance to further researchers and the general field.

This is also where the researcher should refer back to points made in the literature review, both about previous research, and the research results presented.

Is the discussion and analysis balanced?
Are the strengths and weaknesses of the study acknowledged?
Does the discussion refer back to points raised in the lit review?

Conclusion

The conclusion should sum up what was most useful and interesting about the research. The claims for the research should not be too 'grand', and should follow from what has already been discussed.

The gaps or weaknesses in the research should also be summarised.

The implications of the study for further research/practice should also be outlined, but there should not be any new information in the conclusion.

Are the conclusions supported by the results?
Are the implications of the study identified?

Recommendations

Do the recommendations outline areas of possible future research?
Do they recommend ways in which current research could be improved?

Planning and writing the review

Read through the entire article, getting a general idea of the research aims, methods and results.

At this stage, you might have some general questions about the research article that you can think about:

Is it clearly laid out? Are the results clearly presented? What are the main aims and findings? What methodology has been used?

Work through each section in detail, using the criteria provided above, and make brief notes.

How far does each section match up to what it should do?

Are there particular strengths and limitations in each section?

Why? Explain your thinking. You may need some evidence to support your view; for example, if you think that a sample of ten participants seemed quite small, you should try to find a similar study that has used more than ten, to cite as a comparison.

Plan and write your draft

A short critical review should have a brief introduction, simply providing the subject of the research and the author, and outlining the structure you will be using.

The simplest way to structure a critical review is to write a paragraph or two about each section of the study in turn. Within your discussion of each section, you should first sum up the main points such as the key findings, or methodology used, to show your understanding.

After this, you could present the strengths and weaknesses, as you see them, of the section, with an explanation of your thinking, and evidence.

It is useful to plan out each section of your review as a short list, or bullet points, so that you can see that you have included everything.

Final draft

You should point out the **strengths** of the study to show you are aware of their importance, as in:

‘These results are consistent with the aims of the research...’

‘The findings are clearly presented using diagrams and a graph...’

‘The discussion consistently relates the key findings to research discussed earlier...’

When you identify **weaknesses**, you should use a cautious, objective style. You can use such phrases as:

‘This sample seems fairly small in view of...’

‘It might have been helpful to provide more details of...’

‘There is no explanation for the absence of any literature after 2003. It would have been useful to know why this was the case.’

Finally:

Critical analysis improves with practice – any reading and thinking you do as part of your course will help you develop this skill.

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