WRITING A CRITICAL ARTICLE REVIEW

A critical article review briefly describes the content of an article and, more importantly, provides an in-depth analysis and evaluation of its ideas and purpose. The descriptive element of a review should give the reader an understanding of the author’s arguments, while the evaluative element should detail your assessment of the article’s ideas.

A critical article review requires that you identify, summarize and, most importantly, evaluate the ideas and information the author has presented. Critical reviews can be positive or negative, based on your assessment of the article.

Writing a critical article review provides excellent practice in careful analytical reading and writing. Professors often assign article reviews as practice in careful analytical reading. The purpose of an article review is to provide practice in close critical reading and thinking, in analyzing and writing about an author’s perspective on a given topic, and in developing your own intuitions on philosophical issues.

Your article reviews should be approximately 750 - 1000 words and should follow the model discussed in these instructions and presented in class. We will adhere at all times to the MLA writing style. Please consult any available style manual for help with specific writing questions and style issues. You may also wish to consult “How to Write Philosophy Papers”, which can be found on the class web site. Your review should be typed, double-spaced, employing only standard fonts and margins. It is expected that you will employ proper college-level writing skills, including using formal, academic prose. No cover page is necessary.

WHAT A CRITICAL ARTICLE REVIEW IS NOT

A critical article review is not a summary, paraphrase, or synopsis of an article; instead, it is an analytical description of the article—a description of its methodology, organization, and major conclusions—and a thorough evaluation of its strengths and weaknesses.

A critical article review is not merely a report. Reports discuss content, while reviews evaluate strengths, weaknesses and validity through explanation, interpretation, and analysis.

A critical article review is not based on personal reactions to the article, but rather on a careful and objective examination of what the author is attempting to achieve, and a well supported assessment of whether and how he/she achieves it.

YOUR GOAL AS A REVIEWER

As a reviewer, you bring together the two strands of accurate, analytical reading and strong, personal response when you indicate what the article is about and what it might mean to a reader (by explaining what it meant to you). In other words, reviewers answer not only the WHAT but the SO WHAT question about an article. Thus, in writing a
review, you combine the skills of describing what is on the page, analyzing how the article tried to achieve its purpose, and expressing your own reactions.

**READING THE ARTICLE**

As you’re reading or preparing to write the review, you should read actively and critically, always keeping in mind relevant questions. These might include:

- What are the author’s viewpoint and purpose?
- What is the overarching thesis of the article?
- What are the author’s main points?
- What are the author’s theoretical assumptions? Are they discussed explicitly?
- What kind of evidence does the author use to prove his or her points? What are the central arguments? Is the evidence convincing?
- How does this article relate to other articles or books on the same topic?
- What are the most appropriate criteria by which to judge the article? How successful do you think the author was in carrying out the overall purposes of the article?
- What are your own reactions and considered opinions regarding the work?

To read critically is to make judgments about how a text is argued. This is a highly reflective skill requiring you to “stand back” and gain some distance from the text you are reading. (You might have to read a text through once to get a basic grasp of content before you launch into an intensive critical reading.) THE KEY IS THIS:

-- don’t read looking only or primarily for information
-- do read looking for ways of thinking about the subject matter

When you are reading, highlighting, or taking notes, avoid extracting and compiling lists of evidence, lists of facts and examples. Avoid approaching a text by asking “What information can I get out of it?” Rather ask “How does this text work? How is it argued? How is the evidence (the facts, examples, etc.) used and interpreted? How does the text reach its conclusions?”

Depending on your article’s purpose, you should select appropriate criteria by which to judge its success. For example, if an author says his or her purpose is to argue for a particular solution to a public problem, then the review should judge whether the author has defined the problem, identified causes, planned points of attack, provided necessary background information and offered specific solutions. In other articles, however, authors may argue for their theory about a particular phenomenon. Reviews of these articles should evaluate what kind of theory the article is arguing for, how much and what kind of evidence the author uses to support his/her scholarly claims, how valid the evidence seems, how expert the author is, and how much the article contributes to the knowledge of the field.
PREPARE AN OUTLINE

Read over your notes. Choose a statement that expresses the central purpose or thesis of your review. When thinking of a thesis, consider the author’s intentions and whether or not you think those intentions were successfully realized. Eliminate all notes that do not relate to your thesis. Organize your remaining points into separate groups such as points about structure, style, or argument. Devise a logical sequence for presenting these ideas. Remember that all of your ideas must support your central thesis. Remember that you should always employ a draft process approach to writing.

CONSULTING CRITICAL MATERIAL

You are free to consult other existing reviews, discussions, or accounts of your chosen article. Doing so will likely deepen your understanding of your chosen text. You might do so with a view toward addressing some key questions, including:

- Do the reviewers agree on the strengths and weaknesses of the article?
- Do the reviews outline the article’s relationship to other books and articles on the same topic?
- Is there any critical controversy surrounding the article?

Remember to carefully document any ideas from these reviews you incorporate into your own review. You must be very careful to avoid any hint of plagiarism.

WRITING THE ARTICLE REVIEW

You should approach writing your review through a process-approach to writing, outlining, writing drafts, asking students in class to read your drafts, revising, editing, and proofreading prior to completing your final draft.

Your review should be structured by a thesis which will itself be shaped by the kind of review you ultimately decide to write. Your review should have a goal in mind beyond merely summarizing the article. You should take a stand on the material about which you are writing. Your opening paragraph should make clear what your thesis is.

Although you should include what you feel is appropriate for explaining your assessment of an article, reviews generally include the following kinds of information.

Most reviews start off with a heading that includes all the bibliographic information about the article. If your assignment sheet does not indicate which form you should use, you can use the following:

*Title*. Author. Place of publication: publisher, date of publication. Number of pages.
Part One: Introduction

Like most pieces of writing, the review itself usually begins with an introduction that lets your readers know what the review will say. The first paragraph usually includes the author and title again, so your readers don’t have to look up to find the title. You should also include a very brief overview of the contents of the article, the purpose or audience for the article, and your reaction and evaluation. A critical review will usually include a thesis, relevant to the main point of your critique.

Reviews then generally move into a section of background information that helps place the article in context and discusses criteria for judging the article.

Part Two: Article Summary

Next, the review gives a summary of the main points of the article, quoting and paraphrasing key phrases from the author. Summarizing is the process of reducing information from a longer source into a shorter form. When preparing a summary, your objectives are to:

1) condense the original material without altering the meaning, and
2) state the major points in your own words.

Designed to focus on main ideas, a summary should distinguish those points that are essential to an argument from those that are tangential or secondary. A summary should not include details and examples nor should it include your views on the topic. Your evaluation of the article will come in part two of the review.

You should begin by actively and empathetically reading the work to be discussed, going along, at least temporarily, with the thoughts and ideas of the writer, entering into his or her frame of reference and working through the flow of ideas and feelings. You should then try to state the essay’s main point in your own words. What is the author trying to say? What is his or her main idea? You should be able to state this thesis in your own words (a test of your understanding): Essentially, X says that C. Keep in mind that you may need to do several readings of an article. You will probably have to take copious notes and perhaps produce an outline of the article. You may also have to read secondary sources on your article in order to come to a clear understanding of its main points.

In a good essay, there is not only a thesis, there are reasons given in its support. The author does not just pull a central claim out of nowhere; he or she develops and defends the point. You should be able to state the major reasons the author presents in support of his or her central claim: Essentially, X says that C, because R (where X represents the author, C represents the thesis, and R represents the reasons for it). The word essentially is present to indicate that you are trying to capture the main points of the author; you are not including every strand of supporting argument or every detail. The argument that you are attributing to an author represents your attempt to grasp the central point of the essay. It will necessarily omit many details and qualifications. We’ll refer to this construction as
the core thesis argument. Take care to make sure that the author is in fact saying what you have understood him or her to be saying. This requires judgment and care on your part.

Some essays may have no obvious, directly stated central claim or supporting argument. It may be left implicit and it is then your task to make it explicit, properly justifying this. Other essays may be confused or contradictory. The best tactic in this case might be to point this out in a critical review of what makes it confused or contradictory.

**Part Three: Article Evaluation**

Finally, reviewers get to the heart of their writing—their evaluation of the article. Ask yourself the following: “Given that X is trying to show C because R, does he or she achieve this goal?” In this section, reviewers discuss a variety of issues:

- how well the article has achieved its goal,
- what possibilities are suggested by the article,
- what the article has left out,
- how the article compares to others on the subject,
- what specific points are not convincing.

A number of features will enter into your evaluation of the essay, including:

1. *Interest, importance, and plausibility of thesis.*
2. *Quality of core supporting argument.*
3. *Apparent quality of further arguments.*
4. *Accuracy.* Plausibility of claims, acceptability of statements, documentation of claims (where appropriate).
5. *Clarity and organization.* Are points developed in an orderly way? Are background information, description, and explanatory material included where needed?
6. *Coherence and Consistency.* Does the essay hold together? Explicit or implicit contradictions are a serious flaw.
7. *Balance.* Does the author consider objections to his or her position? Is the treatment of opposing views fair and accurate? Are counterarguments carefully developed, if appropriate?

Features 1 to 7 are, in a broad sense, logical: they have to do with the quality and reasonableness of statements, arguments, and reasons. These are generally the central issues focused on in philosophical writing.

It is important to carefully distinguish your views from the author’s, so that you don’t confuse your reader. To keep your focus, remind yourself that your assignment is primarily to discuss the article’s treatment of its topic, not the topic itself. Your key sentences should therefore say “This article shows…the author argues…” rather than “This happened…this is the case….”
On the basis of your understanding of the core thesis argument and a careful critical reading of the essay, you need to reach an evaluation of the author’s essay and set out your comments. There are many ways in which your comments can be organized. Three possible approaches include:

1. **An appreciative essay.** You honestly find an essay to be good, and you tend to agree with the central thesis and the core argument on its behalf. When you have judged an essay to be good, you have found it to be well written and well organized, and to make a plausible central claim, based on what struck you, on reading, as convincing arguments and balanced considerations.

2. **Mixed reaction essay.** Appropriate when you have judged the quality of the essay you are evaluating to be mixed; you have found both significant strengths and significant weaknesses.

3. **Negatively critical essay.** When an essay strikes you as just plain poor. Your evaluation of it is mainly negative, consisting of critical arguments from you, showing how and why the original essay is flawed.

**Part Four: Conclusion**

Like other essays, article reviews usually end with a conclusion which ties together issues raised in the review and provides a concise comment on the article.

**SUMMARY VERSUS EVALUATION**

A critical review of an article is not primarily a summary; rather, it comments on and evaluates the work in the light of specific issues and theoretical concerns in a course. A critical review consists of thoughts, responses, and reactions. It is not necessarily negative. Nor do you need to know as much about the subject as the author (because you hardly ever will). The skills you need are an ability to follow an argument and test a hypothesis. Regardless of how negative or positive your critique is, you need to be able to justify and support your position.

For the purposes of this assignment, no more than one-half of the review should summarize the author’s main ideas and at least one-half should evaluate the article. Remember, this is not a report. The summary should consist of a discussion and highlights of the major arguments, features, trends, concepts, themes, ideas, and characteristics of the book. While you may use direct quotes from the article (make sure you always give the page number), such quotes should never be the bulk of the summary. Much of your grade will depend on how well you describe and explain the material in YOUR OWN WORDS. You might want to take the major organizing themes of the article and use them to organize your own discussion. This does NOT mean, however, that I want a point-by-point summary. Your goal is a unified essay.
Because it is the critic’s job to both relate the author’s main ideas and overall effectiveness of the work, it is essential that the critical review be well organized, supported in its generalizations and interpretation of the piece with examples and/or quotations, and logically explain the critic’s final judgment about the general quality of the work being reviewed. This means the critic must develop a solid introduction of the thesis and course of the review, support it with sound and well developed textual paragraphs and provide a basic summary or concluding statement. The most important step in writing a critical book review is to limit the critique to the most important aspects of the author's work. To do this, the critic must ask the correct questions about the book and then answer them by means of critical analysis and evaluation of the author's main point and literary effectiveness.