



Critical Media Reviews

Introduction

Students are often asked to write reviews of various texts—including films, articles, fiction, nonfiction, poetry, and even advertisements—to analyze the text's central ideas and purpose.

A good review starts with a summary, but it does not end there. It should demonstrate not only understanding of the material, but also critical thinking. This is shown by analyzing the stylistic and rhetorical choices the creator made, then making judgments—backed up by evidence from the text—about how successful those choices are in communicating with the audience.

Getting Started

Here are some points to consider and questions to ask while preparing to write a critical review of a work in any medium:

- What is the central argument or purpose of the text being analyzed? Is the main point easy to recognize?
- How does the creator address the subject? Is there a strong point of view? If a particular worldview or ideology is promoted, where does that come from? Is the creator's background related to this point of view?
- How is the text constructed? Does it make sense? Is it confusing?
- Would other individuals benefit from reading, viewing, or listening to the work? If so, who? Why?
 - Keep in mind that the audience for the work might not be the same as the audience for the review.
- Critical reviews do not need to follow a chronological order. In other words, there is no need to match the analysis with each aspect of the creator's treatment of the subject.
 - Instead of a chronological approach, a reviewer might analyze by theme.
- Provide information and analysis to help prospective viewers or readers decide how much attention to give the reviewed text.

A reviewer's opinion of the text often changes during the analysis process. After finishing the first draft, a reviewer's reflection on the text as a whole and the review's cohesiveness—how well its various parts stick together—often leads to a deeper and more thorough level of analysis that can lead to a significant revision of the review.

Below are some questions to help start the critical thinking process.

Films

- In no more than one paragraph, briefly summarize the plot, then begin to analyze.
 - Is the plot straightforward and linear, or is it complex and convoluted?

- Does it make sense? If not, why would the screenwriter or director decide to make it confusing?
- Research the context of the film.
 - Does it come from a book? If so, how is it different from the book?
 - If it is historical, is it accurate?
- Analyze the writing.
 - Is the dialogue natural? Is it stylized? If so, why?
- Do the actors do a good job of playing the characters?
- How does the camerawork support the plot and characters?
 - For example, is the camera in the actors' faces? Is it distant and panoramic? Does it move jerkily?
- Does the soundtrack support or distract from the film?
- How do the sets and props look?
 - Are they well done and authentic, or do they look like there wasn't enough money to do a good job?

Articles

- Where does the article appear? In a newspaper, a scholarly journal, a popular magazine?
- Who wrote the article? Is the writer qualified to speak out on this subject?
- Is the article aimed at a particular audience? If so, how does it do that effectively?
- How persuasive is the article? Does it use rhetorical devices (ethos, logos, pathos) to persuade? Which ones and how?

Fiction (Story or Novel)

- In no more than one paragraph, briefly summarize the plot, then begin to analyze.
- What is the genre of the story or book (e.g., mystery, sci-fi, coming-of-age)? What do readers expect from this genre? Does this book follow these conventions or break them?
- Is the story easy to follow, or does a complicated plot mislead the reader? Why would an author make this choice, and how would the choice affect the purpose of the work?
- Is the writing straightforward, with accessible language, or is it convoluted, with complex sentence structures and vocabulary? Why? How does that relate to the plot? How does it affect the work?
- Are the characters familiar types, or are they unique? Are they based on real people or invented? What point is the author making with the kinds of characters created?

Advertisement

- Who is the target audience?
- What worldview and values does the advertisement assume the audience has?

- Break the advertisement into components: visual, auditory, and textual; how does each add to the message?
 - What are the strategies used by the creators in these components? Do they motivate the audience?
- What emotions does the advertisement provoke?

Conclusion

A critical media review depends on more than just a summary and a statement of whether the reviewer found the work good or bad. A critical media review should analyze the work using criteria that are appropriate to the type of media. It should also answer questions about what aspects are important, what the creator's intent was, and whether the work successfully fulfilled this intent.

Remember, it is not necessary to be an expert on a topic or medium to write a good review. The key is to think critically about the main points in the material: what they are, what they might mean, and how different audiences might react.

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