

Critical Reviews of Journal Articles

Herbert T. Coutts
University of Alberta

<http://www.library.ualberta.ca/guides/criticalreviews/index.cfm>

A critical review of a journal article is an evaluation of an article's strengths, weaknesses and validity. It is used to inform readers of an article's value through explanation, interpretation and analysis. The reviewer must present information that will allow the reader to make a value judgment about the article.

Good reviews convey the content of the article, the author's approach to the subject, and the author's conclusions; the best reviews avoid a point-by-point listing of themes in favor of a more integrated approach.

Good reviews place the work in the context of its field and give a sense of the work's significance.

Good reviews present a balanced analysis of the article's strengths and weaknesses and illustrate those points with examples.

Good reviews are written in a clear and lively style. Style is not easy to define, but the best reviews illustrate that elusive quality which makes their piece both interesting and engaging.

Guidelines and Questions to be Considered

1. Reviews should begin with a full bibliographic citation (author, title of journal article, name of journal, volume, issue, date of publication, pages).
2. Is there any biographical information about the author given? What are the author's qualifications and authority?
3. Who is the intended audience?
4. Define the general problem area. What does the author intend to discuss? Why?
5. Does the author try to build on past research?
6. What is the objective or purpose of the research? Is this clearly stated?
7. Does the author define any terms? Are the definitions specific, useful, circular?
8. What is the effect of the author's language? Is the vocabulary and sentence structure appropriate? Does the author maintain neutrality in his/her choice of words and terms or are they emotionally charged or biased?
9. Are references given (footnotes or bibliography)? What is the size of the reference section? Are the references recent, important? How are the references used: for support, rebuttal, etc.?

10. If the article is a report of a research study, does the author clearly state what is expected to happen? What is the sample for the study and how is it selected? Does the author discuss factors or variables that may affect the research? Are the methods for measuring results clearly explained and appropriate? Does the expected result occur?
11. Are illustrations, tables or graphs used? Do they complement the text? Are they the best method to present data, or are they unnecessary?
12. What are the author's major findings and conclusions? Have these been supported by the author's analyses, arguments, findings or evidence? Has the author overlooked anything?
13. Is the article referred to by anyone else? (Check the *Social Sciences Citation Index* for this information.) How is the article used by other authors: background, support, rebuttal, etc.?
14. Does the author accomplish her/his objective? Does the author do what she/he has set out to do?
15. Does the author suggest areas for further research or discussion?

The guidelines and questions listed above are suggestions that should be considered when writing a critical review of an article. Not all of the questions or guidelines will be appropriate for every article and depend upon the purpose of the review.

Students wishing more detailed information on reviewing journal articles should check the following publications:

* Bogdan, Robert C. and Sari Knopp Biklen. *Qualitative research for education: an introduction to theory and methods*. 3rd ed. Boston: Allyn and Bacon, c1998. (LB 1028 B67 1998 EDUC c.1-3)

* Eichler, Margrit. *Nonsexist research methods: a practical guide*. New York: Routledge, 1991. (H 62 E345 1991 HSS c.1)

* Hart, Chris. *Doing a literature review: releasing the social science research imagination*. London: Sage, 1998. (H62 H37 1998 EDUC c.1)

* Hittleman, Daniel R. and Alan J. Simon. *Interpreting educational research: an introduction for consumers of research*. 3rd ed. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Merrill, 2002. (LB 1028 H537 2002 EDUC c.1-2)

* Katzer, Jeffrey; Kenneth H. Cook and Wayne W. Crouch. *Evaluating information: a guide for users of social science research*. 4th ed. Boston: McGraw-Hill, c1998. (H 62 K19 1998 HSS c.1)

* Tripodi, Tony, Phillip Fellin and Henry J. Meyer. *The assessment of social research*. 2nd ed. Itasca, Ill.: FE Peacock Publishing, 1983. (HV 11 T83 1983 EDUC c.2 HSS c.1)