

Writing Critical Analysis Papers¹

A critical analysis paper asks the writer to make an argument about a particular book, essay, movie, etc. The goal is two fold: one, identify and explain the argument that the author is making, and two, provide your own argument about that argument. One of the key directions of these assignments is often to avoid/minimize summary – you are not writing a book report, but evaluating the author’s argument.

Potential points of criticism

Sometimes it can seem intimidating to “criticize” a book or article; after all, they are professors and experienced policymakers. However, part of this exercise is to expose the fact that even though these authors are highly qualified, they are still advancing an argument and providing evidence--their aim is to persuade you that their argument is true, not to just present facts. Once you recognize that these authors are making arguments, you can analyze whether or not you find their argument compelling. Following are some possible questions you could ask to evaluate arguments:

- **Theoretical questions** – How does the author understand the situation? What is his/her theoretical background? How would this influence their view of the situation?
 - If the author is a clear proponent of Western, liberal forms of democracy, how will this influence his/her study of authoritarian states?
- **Definitional questions** - Are all the concepts in the text clear? Does the author define a concept vaguely to allow it to travel across different situations? If a concept can relate two seemingly different situations, is the concept meaningful?
 - Can we really compare the existing communist government in China to the communist government in the former Soviet Union?
- **Evidence questions:**
 - Does the author’s evidence support their argument? Do they have enough specific evidence to prove the more general point?
 - Does the revolutionary government in Venezuela reflect a more general trend to the left in all of Latin America?
 - Does the author underemphasize or ignore evidence that is contrary to their argument?
 - Is an argument compelling if it ignores an obvious exception – Can we really say that democracies are inherently peaceful given the 2003 Iraq invasion?
 - Is the evidence credible? Can you identify a bias in the evidence?
 - Was the study done by a political action committee, and environmental NGO, or a non-partisan research group? How might a group affiliation or funding influence the outcome of research?
- **Implication/Policy relevance questions** – What are the implications of this argument? Are those implications positive or negative? How has the author dealt with this issue?
 - If Western modes of thinking are the only efficient path for economic development, what does this mean with societies that have different cultures and values?
- **Other approaches:**
 - Is the author’s argument consistent throughout the book? Or, does the conclusion seem to offer a different argument than he/she presented in the introduction?
 - Does the author’s background have important implications for their argument?
 - Do the specific language choices of the author betray a certain ideology or bias, or frame the argument in a certain way?

¹ Adopted from J.L. Beyer, “Critically Analyzing an Academic Article or Book”

Structuring a Critical Analysis Paper

Most critical analysis papers begin with a short summary of the work and then dive in to the argument. Since most of these paper assignments are short, it is important to be concise in all parts of your analysis. Writing an outline (and following it) is crucial to remain focused on your argument and avoid summary or irrelevant description. Following is a sample outline for a critical analysis paper:

- I. Introduction
 - a. Identify the work being criticized
 - b. Present thesis – argument about the work
 - c. Preview your argument – what are the steps you will take to prove your argument
- II. Short summary of the work
 - a. Does not need to be comprehensive – present only what the reader needs to know to understand your argument
- III. Your argument
 - a. Your argument will likely involve a number of sub-arguments –mini-theses you prove to prove your larger argument true. For example, if your thesis was that the author’s presumption that the world will soon face a “clash of civilizations” is flawed because he inadequately specifies his key concept, civilizations, you might prove this by:
 - i. Noting competing definitions of civilizations
 - ii. Identifying how his examples do not meet the example of civilizations
 - iii. Argue that civilization is so broad and non-specific that it is not useful
 - b. This should be the bulk of the paper – Your professor/TA wants to read your argument about the work, not a summary.
- IV. Conclusion
 - a. Reflect on how you have proven your argument.
 - b. Point out the importance of your argument (beyond it being a requirement for passing the class 😊)
 - c. Note potential avenues for additional research or analysis

Final Reminders

- Even though you are potentially only referring to one source, you still need to cite your information, using either parenthetical citation or footnotes/endnotes.
- Double check the assignment to make sure you have covered all the points that your professor/TA has asked.