

WRITING THE CRITICAL RESPONSE

--adapted from Simon & Schuster Handbook for Writers, 4th edition, Writing: Invention Forma and Style by Podis & Podis, The Purposeful Writer by Donna Gorrell

A critique is an analysis of and a commentary on another piece of writing. It generally focuses on technique as well as on content. A critical response essay (or interpretive essay or review) has two missions: to summarize a source's main idea and to respond to the source's main ideas with reactions based on your synthesis.

Summarizing

The first step to writing is to read actively and thoughtfully, seeking answers to the following questions as you go:

- What are the main points, ideas, or arguments of the work (book, article, play essay, etc.)?
- How is the work organized?
- What evidence/support does the author give?
- What is the primary purpose of the work?

(For further guidance on summarizing, see our handout Five Keys to Writing Effective Summaries.)

Analyzing (interpretation and evaluation)

To help you generate content for your analysis, consider the following questions:

- Does the work achieve its purpose? Fully or only partially?
- Was the purpose worthwhile to begin with? Or was it too limited, trivial, broad, theoretical, etc.?
- Is any of the evidence weak or insufficient? In what way? Conversely, is the evidence/support particularly effective or strong?
- Can I supply further explanation to clarify or support any of the main points, ideas, and arguments?
- Are there sections you don't understand? Why?
- Was there any area where the author offered too much or too little information?
- Is the organization of the work an important factor? Does its organization help me understand it, hinder my understanding, or neither?
- Is anything about the language or style noteworthy?

Organization

The length of your essay and whether you respond to a single passage or to an entire work will vary with the assignment. Regardless of length and breadth, all critical responses include the following basic elements:

- Introduction:
- Body:
 - Summary
 - Transition
 - Analysis: Evaluate the evidence: sufficient (enough evidence, examples), representative (large enough pool/sample), relevant (accurate correlations), accurate, claims fairly qualified
 - Transition
 - Response: base reaction on your own experience, prior knowledge, and opinions (?)
- Conclusion:
- Documentation:

Within the body, you may choose from three basic patterns of organization: write all the summary paragraphs first, followed by the analysis portion; alternate between summary and analysis paragraphs so that each paragraph of summary is followed by a critique of the summarized information; or combine a summary and critique of each idea within each paragraph of the body.