

## The Critical Review

- In today's world, so many books are written and published that one cannot hope to read everything, even in a specific field. In order to have an idea of what others are saying, I can read book reviews. They give the thrust of the work, an evaluation of its contents, and an assessment of its importance.
- In a university environment, critical book reviews force students to read carefully and write thoughtfully.

### What is a critical Review?

- A critical review is not a destructive criticism of the author and his or her ideas, but a careful analysis of the work. A critical review attempts to answer at least seven different questions:
  - What is the basic thrust of the author's work?
  - Why does the author say what he or she says?
  - To whom is the writing directed and for what purpose?
  - For whom or what (or against whom or what) does the author stand?
  - How well has the author met his or her own objectives?
  - How does this work compare with other writings?
  - What is the reviewer's opinion of the work?

### How do I write a critical review?

- Preparing a 4-5 page book review entails reading, taking notes, evaluating what has been read, and writing out a summary, assessment, and comments of the book or article.
- A book review should contain four main components:
  1. A complete title with bibliographical data. For example:

N. T. Wright. *What Saint Paul Really Said: Was Paul of Tarsus the Real Founder of Christianity?* Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997. 192 pp.

**This information must be at the top of the first page. This is standard procedure.**
  2. Relevant information regarding the author, his or her academic training, position, and other books authored. Information on the author may be obtained from the book itself, from biographical files many libraries keep, and from other sources. This information should be selective and integrated into the review. Do not open with a lengthy paragraph filled with the accomplishments of the author. Your goal is to establish credibility or lack thereof.
  3. A summary should synthesize the thrust of the book and its main arguments. Take care not to distort the emphasis given by the author. The length of the summary will depend, not only on the length of the material, but on the complexity of its contents. Try to keep the summary to no more than two-thirds of the review. A summary must precede the evaluation. The reader must first understand the content of the book before hearing the reviewer's critique.
  4. An evaluation of the book should be made first of all on the basis of the author's own objectives, as stated in the introduction. This mandates a careful reading of the introduction or preface. A critique must document the author's statements, giving the page where the item was found. Sometimes a review quotes paragraphs that show the author's position. Be sure to keep in mind the author's content in order not to distort the ideas. Although one may disagree with the author and with the position he or she espouses, the language of a book or article review must be courteous. A well-documented analysis will be more convincing than a heated, emotional tirade. The language of a review written for a class assignment should be similar to that of research—cool, calm, and collected. Think of meeting the author of the book at a professional meeting and having him say in dismay, "So are you the reviewer who hit me so hard?"
- For formatting and content samples see the following journals on reserve in the library: *Pneuma, Journal of Pentecostal Theology, Books and Culture, JETS, etc.*

### Questions to guide evaluation:

- Is the subject vital? If so, to whom? What difference will it make ten years from now?
- Is the subject too broad or too narrow for the author? Is it too shallow, too restricted?
- Is the author straightforward? Does he announce his bias? His limitations? His intentions? Every writer leaks bias for good or for ill!
- In the introduction, are the purpose of the study and the statement of the problem clear?
- Is the presentation clear and logical? Is the sequence natural? Are there missing points? Are the sections clear and self-contained?
- Is the research reliable? Does anything indicate you cannot fully trust this paper? Do you feel the author really looked everywhere she possibly could and reported accurately and without bias?
- What does the use of footnotes show? Are there too many notes? Too few? Are they from old sources? All from similar sources? Or from the same sources? Is the form clear and consistently used?
- Does the bibliography tell you something additional about the paper? Can you tell whether the author is using primary sources? General sources? Or authorities in the field?
- Is the language clear, concise, or wordy and unnecessarily difficult? Does the choice of words show carelessness? Conceit?
- Does the paper show a sincere desire to search out truth or is it a defense of a position?
- Usually the last item in an evaluation includes assessment of what group(s) will profit from reading this book. You may also want to suggest how useful the book will be for this certain group.

Further Tips for a critical review:

- A title page is not necessary.
- Insert page numbers. If you do use a title page (and it is not necessary), start pagination with the first page of your text – not the title page.
- Put your name, course, and date in the top right hand corner of page. Single space in the header (see my header).
- Do not leave spaces between paragraphs.
  
- Be sure to indent new paragraphs – hit enter (one time) and the tab button.
- Do not use a footnote when citing or quoting the author of the work. Put the page number at the end of the sentence in brackets with the punctuation to follow. For example, “Jesus and Paul share the same view” (33).
- Every quotation or reference to another work requires citation!!!
  - Reviews typically require FEW secondary references.
- All direct quotations longer than two lines must be single spaced. The margins must also be reduced by one tab on the left and right sides.
- For a short review, be careful to limit the number of quotations – shorten lengthy quotes by citing only what is crucial. Try to catch the sense of the writer and put her thoughts in your own words.
- The first time you use the name of any person give the full name. Every subsequent reference should refer to the last name only.
  - Thus Luke Timothy Johnson... Then Johnson... Not Luke, Dr., Mr., Mister, Mrs., Johnson!
  - Refer to the author by name. Refrain from statements like... “the author/writer states:” The writer has a name. Use it.
  - Refer to the author by name not the book. “*What Saint Paul Really Said* emphasizes...” is not legit. The book is not personal. The book does not communicate. Use the name of the writer – she is the communicator. “Jackson emphasizes...”
- The title of a work must be in *italics*. A chapter must be in double “quotation marks.”
  - All foreign terms must be in *italics* - *Pax Romana, imago Dei*.
- *Don't* use contractions.
- Do not use numbers – “21<sup>st</sup> century” = twenty first century.
- Be sure your spell check is on. Take note of the red squiggly lines (lines).
  - Please take note of the spelling of proper names. Thus the name of the instructor or author conveys attention (or lack thereof) to detail. I've seen more than I care to share.
    - Mittlestat, Middlestat, Middlemann, Martinstat. Mitteldale, etc. OUCH. First impressions are crucial – imagine sending this through your office or as a resume.
- Avoid superlatives unless absolutely necessary. “Everyone will agree that this book is the best on the subject...” This cannot be quantified.

Concerning your commentary:

- The introduction should grab the attention of the reader. Provide the reader with a statement or two concerning the big idea of the work. Think of the magnitude of the work – pioneering, controversial, summarizing, etc.
  - Don't just jump into chapter one.
- The conclusion should summarize again the big idea of the book and your primary response.

Before submitting your final paper:

- Read your paper out loud. Ask a friend to read it to you – preferably twice – for grammar and structure, then content.
- Imagine giving the paper to your boss.
- No need for binders, folders, etc. Simply staple your paper!

See also Nancy Jean Vyhmeister, Quality Research Papers (Zondervan, 2001).

## Why write?

- **Values/Personal Interests** (choosing your topic; i.e., asking, “What’s important to me?”)
- **Focus/Scope/Conciseness** (narrowing of ideas)
- **Dependence on God** (Yes! Why not?)
- **Resourcefulness** (finding *appropriate* sources)
- **Organization** (putting your thoughts together in a way that can be clearly presented)
- **Honor** (acknowledging those who have gone before, i.e., the academic efforts of others)
- **Integration** (How does this paper relate to *life*?)
- **Creativity** (making the most of the opportunity to express yourself)
- **Resolve** (figuring out what you believe on the issue, why, and being bold enough to express it)
- **Responsibility & Time Management** (meeting process deadlines, making your Write Place appt.)
- **Clarity and Coherence** (learning to write well)
- **Accountability** (avoiding plagiarism)
- **Thoroughness** (making sure you’ve covered the main elements of the topic)
- **Format requirements** (i.e., Turabian vs. APA) – *may make it easier next time!*
- **Attention to detail** (meeting the requirements of responsibility)
- **Computer Skills** (ah, those footnotes!)
- **Fruit of the Spirit** (patience in particular; also peacefulness, faithfulness, etc.!)
- **Community** (realizing the benefit of a good editor) & (learning the librarian’s name!)
- **Punctuality** (making the due date)
- **Achievement** (sense of a job well done)
- **Improvement** (taking professor comments on the paper and learning from them)
- **Insight** (you become more of an “expert” on the topic than you were before!)
- **Community** (publishable material can become part of the greater academic community)
  - I am indebted to my colleague Lois Olena for this list!!

### Discerning Mittelstadt’s grading language:

Frag = sentence fragment.

Para = paragraph.

SS / DS – single/double space

Wordy = difficult to follow – rewrite the sentence.

“>” = indent new paragraph.

Circled letters – typically relate to capitalization.

UL = Underline

Dangling = Incomplete thought – unfinished business.

Redundant = repetition not necessary

Write Place = I am strongly encouraging you to utilize the Write Place before your next paper.

Format = on the top of the first page means improper bibliographical title.