



Critical Analysis of Scholarly Sources

At the basic level, a critical analysis begins with questions designed to pick apart aspects of a source for a better understanding. When reading scholarly books, chapters, and articles for research, critical analysis can help you identify the author's claims, the strength of the evidence and analysis used to support argument, and the plausibility of conclusions. This handout is designed to help you critically engage with sources by presenting guidelines to consider when conducting a research critique or critical analysis and questions to consider in writing one.

Understanding Critical Evaluation

The process of critical evaluation lies at the heart of what we might call knowledge creation. When researchers submit research papers to peer-reviewed journals in their fields, their papers are reviewed anonymously by other researchers who critically assess each study in terms of:

- The study's contribution to knowledge, theory, or practice in a field.
- The study's research design and methodology.
- The study's findings: how they are presented and interpreted.
- The researcher's conclusions.
- The writing quality, clarity, and style, and the organization of the information presented.

Critical Reading

Strong critical analysis begins with critical reading. When engaging with a source, so not merely focus on the arguments and conclusions. Instead, engage more deeply by considering how the argument is constructed. This section provides some critical questions to guide your reading, along with potential answers and elements to look out for.

What is the author's motivation in writing this work?

Authorial motivations can include things like:

- Proposing a new point of view on a topic.
- Defending, confirming, or further developing an existing point of view.
- Reformulating an existing idea for a better explanation.
- Dismissing a point of view through an evaluation of its criteria.
- Reconciling two or more seemingly different points of view.

How does the author approach the subject matter?

What kinds of words does the author use in their discussion? These can point to the author's approach. An author's coverage of a topic can include things like:

- Observing and identifying objects for analysis.
- Describing features.
- Defining, referring, classifying, distinguishing, or comparing terms.
- Illustrating or exemplifying a general point to explain or apply it.
- Theorizing about or explaining why things are the way they are.
- Conjecturing or speculating about explanations.
- Evaluating the adequacy of observations.

What is the overall structure of the author's work?

Look at how the separate parts fit together to build and support the author's thesis. Important structural features can include:

- Points in the article that feature repetition or summary
 - These are moments when authors often focus on their larger argument or thesis
- Signposts
 - These are phrases that highlight the direction of the writing

Critical Questions

Once you have a good understanding of the author's thesis, motivation, approach, and structure, it is time to dig deeper into the information that will form the basis of your critical evaluation. Critical questions can be useful to help you engage thoughtfully when you read a source. The following are some questions to consider when reading the source which can form the basis of your critical evaluation of that source.

Identifying information to include

- Where and when was the article published?
- Who wrote the article?
- What was the purpose of the study? What was the nature of the study?
 - e.g., a case study, ethnography, a content analysis, or an experimental study
- What is the analytical approach or theoretical framework?
 - e.g., a feminist analysis, a document analysis, an application of a specific theoretical model

Research design and methodology

- How does the method reflect or augment other studies of the same topic?
 - What makes this method feasible?
 - How realistic is it?
- Why will this method produce data that will answer the research question?
 - How does the method address questions of validity?
- What are the limitations of the methodology?
 - Are limitations minor or large
 - How does the researcher overcome limitations of the method?
 - How will these limitations affect your ability to use this data to answer your research question?
- Was the research conducted ethically and following tri-council and Ethics Framework guidelines (If applicable)?

Interpretation of findings

- Did the researcher find a correlation (relationship) or a cause?
- Are there alternative interpretations of the findings?
- How “generalizable” are the findings?
- Can the findings be applied to other populations or situations?

Writing quality, clarity, style, and the organization of information

- Does the source reflect the genre of the source’s discipline(s)?
- Does the source offer sufficient detail?
 - Are there gaps in the description or places with unnecessary description?
- Does the source present the information logically?
- Do the sources present an objective viewpoint?
 - Does the author seem to have a bias or blind spot?

The value of the study

- Is the research problem significant?
- What contribution does the study make to the advancement of knowledge, theory, or practice?

Guidelines for Writing a Research Critique

This section provides general guidelines for writing a research critique or critical analysis piece. The specific requirements might vary, depending on your assignment, but this section will provide a general overview of the main features of this type of writing.

Note: While this section discusses a research critique as a type of written project, many other types of writing also involve the critical analysis of sources. In particular, if you are writing an argumentative/persuasive essay critical analysis of sources is a valuable tool in defense of your arguments.

Introductions

Begin your critique by identifying the article's title, author(s), date of publication, and the name of the journal or other publication in which it appeared. In your introduction, you should also briefly describe the purpose and nature of the study and, if applicable, its theoretical framework. If the paper was not published in a peer-reviewed journal, consider the credibility of the publication in which it appeared and the credentials (and possible biases) of the researchers.

Body Paragraphs

If you are reviewing a research study, organize the body of your critique according to the paper's structure. Start with a brief description and analysis of the strengths and weaknesses of the research design and methodology, and then critically review the presentation and interpretation of the findings and the researchers' conclusions. If the research topic is time sensitive, consider whether the data used in the study was sufficiently current.

Headings

Use headings to structure your critique. In each section, provide enough descriptive information so that your review is clear to a reader who may not have read the study.

Style and tone

Aim for an objective, balanced, and well supported critique. Polit and Beck (2008) advise:

- Balance your analysis to include both strengths and weakness.
- Justify your criticism by giving examples of the study's weaknesses and strengths

Use past or present tense consistently whenever you refer to completed research. Check with your instructor or librarian if your discipline has a preference.

Use a standard citation style (e.g., APA, MLA, Chicago, or Vancouver) to format references in your critique, and be sure to cite page numbers for all quoted passages.

Conclusions

Conclude your analysis by briefly summing up the strengths and weaknesses of the study and by assessing its contribution to the advancement of knowledge, theory, or practice. Consider suggesting research directions and methodological considerations for future researchers.

References

Lab Space, Open Learn. (n.d.) Critical review of research approaches. Retrieved September 9, 2013 from: <http://linspace.open.ac.uk/mod/oucontent/view.php>

Polit, D. F., & Beck, C.T. (2008). Essentials of nursing research: methods, appraisal, and utilization (8th ed). Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott.

Taylor, G. (2009). A student's writing guide: How to plan and write successful essays. Cambridge (UK): Cambridge University Press.

University of New South Wales. (2013). Writing a critical review. Retrieved February 13, 2025. from: <https://student.unsw.edu.au/writing-critical-review>