

GUIDELINES FOR WRITING A CRITICAL REVIEW ESSAY

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Firm rules

1. Your paper should state and defend your personal judgment of the quality of the body of literature under consideration. How good or bad is it, as a whole? (Note carefully that the assignment is not to evaluate, say, what governments did during the Great Depression. It is to evaluate a body of scholarship on that subject, or a subject like it.) I will look most of all for that overall personal judgment and for evidence from the literature supporting it.
2. *Please* do not submit a paper limited to *describing* what various authors said. I want to see you grappling with their ideas.
3. The maximum length is 3,000 words. Having to edit down to this limit is part of the value of the exercise. If your paper lacks a word count or is too long, I will not read it until you have submitted a version no longer than 3,000 words.
4. At the top of the first page, show your word count and your USC student identification (social security) number. Please do not show your name anywhere on your paper.

Recommendations based on experience

First study some models, some good published essays reviewing a body of literature (not a single book). *International Organization* and *World Politics*, for example, publish them often.

As you read your books and articles and before beginning to write, decide on your answers to key general questions whose content will depend on your criteria. For example:

1. What do these works have in common? Do all use the same set of concepts and assumptions, or do authors start with fundamentally different concepts?
2. Is the purpose to explain? to interpret? What is the thing to be explained or interpreted, or the dependent variable?
3. What is the central argument of each work? What causal or motivating factors are emphasized?
4. How clear or confused is it? Are there any problems such as shifting meanings, ambiguous terms, inconsistency in the argument, or unintended circularity?
5. How original or creative is its contribution, relative to what was known when it was published? Does it raise new questions or suggest interesting lines of new investigation?
6. How valid or accurate are the claims in light of empirical evidence you can find? How rigorous or weak an empirical test has each hypothesis passed?
7. Who in the world is harmed and who benefits if we think this way? What are the value implications of using this intellectual approach?

8. Does the work point to or imply any line of practical action as being better than another? If it is right, what should one *do*? Does it have any practical value for any actor in today's world political economy?
9. Does this body of literature make any contribution to theory development? If so, in what sense?

Decide on your criteria for good scholarship and state them right at the outset of your paper.

Decide on your main conclusion, your evaluation of this body of literature as a whole as measured against your personal criteria. Ideally, assess your literature comparatively, as better than or worse than some other particular body of knowledge you are familiar with. Comparison across topics can itself be a fertile source of interesting insights on your own subject's literature, and it puts things in perspective.

Hit me with a bold statement of your main thesis right at the outset. Then I recommend dividing the essay into sections according to your criteria--first evaluating the body of literature as a whole against one dimension, then evaluate it against the second criterion, etc.-- rather than dividing the essay into sections taking up article 1, then article 2, etc. The latter form risks falling into the trap of reporting what other people said rather than defending critical points of your own.