Writing a Critical Summary of an Article or Paper

What is a critical summary?
A critical summary is a concise review of an article or paper that combines a summary and a critical comment. Writing a critical summary involves analysis and evaluation. You need to

- understand the main points in an article/paper
- analyze the findings or argument of the article/paper
- decide the appropriate criteria by which to evaluate the article/paper
- provide a critical evaluation of the article/paper based on the criteria selected

The ability to critically summarize is not only important in academic study, it is also important in your work because it enables you to

- keep up to date and adjust to change
- assess and comment on problems and proposed solutions discussed in articles, papers, reports and other professional literature, and
- evaluate and comment on solutions proposed in the workplace

What steps should you take in critically summarizing an article, paper or report?

Allow enough time
Plan to spend at least one half the time you devote to this assignment to reading and understanding the material. Before you can write about the reading, you have to understand it, and this can take more time than you anticipate. Does the article make sense to you in lay terms (could you explain this to someone who knows nothing about the topic?) When you can clearly explain the material in your own words, you are ready to write about it.

Scan the material
Read the headings or subheadings and note the overall organization of the paper.

- Do the headings/subheadings make sense?
- Why do you think the author organized the material in this way?
- How do the headings and subheadings relate to the title of the paper?

Are there any photographs, charts, graphs, diagrams, maps, etc?

- Read the captions for these illustrations.
- How do these relate to the title of the paper?

Read the “Introduction” or “Abstract” and the “Discussion” or “Conclusion” sections
Read the first paragraph (or the section headed “Introduction” or “Abstract”).

- Identify the reason for the article or paper.

Read the “Discussion” or “Conclusion” sections to identify how the author is interpreting the research findings.

- Note how the author summarizes the thesis presented in the body of the paper or what recommendations s/he makes based on the paper.
**Read in detail**

Once you’ve read the Introduction and Discussion or Conclusion sections:

- Go back to the article and read each section in more detail.
- Plan to read each section more than once.
- Highlight or underline the main points and key phrases
- Write one-sentence summaries for each of the main points on a separate sheet of paper. Always note definitions, key words and technical terms. Note any page numbers for direct quotes. Keep direct quotes to a minimum and ensure they are copied exactly. In your writing, quotes are used to support your argument, not to form the argument itself. You can use these one-sentence summaries later when you draft your critical summary.
- Leave space after your one-sentence summaries for later notes and comments – e.g. things that are not clear; contradictions; points of agreement or disagreement with other readings on the same topic; controversial statements or viewpoints presented; whether you agree with what is being said.
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- Expect not to fully understand the article the first time. You will have to read it more than once before you can talk about it in your own words.

**Read analytically and evaluate what you read**

Reading analytically involves identifying the purpose, the main points, the methodology and findings or conclusions. In addition, analysis for a critical summary involves

- identifying unstated assumptions
- steps in the argument that are not logical
- any additional purposes of the article or paper that are not explicitly stated

Evaluating the material means making judgments about the value (both positive and negative) of the article or paper against specific criteria. Here is a list of generic criteria which may be useful; however, not all of them will be relevant for evaluating all materials:

- the timeliness of the material
- the degree to which the article or paper makes an original contribution
- the logic of the view put forward
- the validity of the evidence put forward
- the theoretical framework used:
  - is the framework valid?
  - has the framework been applied appropriately?
- the methodology used:
  - is the methodology appropriate?
  - is the methodological approach explained clearly?
  - does the methodological approach have any weaknesses?
  - is the study sufficiently comprehensive and thorough?
  - is anything important omitted in the research?
the findings:
- are the findings presented and described clearly and fully?
- do the findings seem sound?
- could the data be interpreted in another way?
- do/does the author(s) account for everything in the data or do they ignore something that might be important?
- the validity of the conclusions
- the thoroughness with which the topic is treated
- its value compared to that of other articles/papers on the topic
- the appropriateness of the material for the intended audience
- the extent to which it might satisfy the specific needs of a specific user

How can I structure a critical summary?

A critical summary has an introduction, a body and a conclusion. But before you begin writing your summary, make sure that you understand all the assignment directions including any specific guidelines about the assignment structure, number of words or pages, etc. Consult your instructor if you are unclear about any aspect of the assignment.

**In the Introduction (1 paragraph of 3-4 sentences), you should:**
- provide a context for the article or paper (background information or shared knowledge)
- give the title of the article or paper, author, source, and, in the case of a magazine or journal article, the date of publication and the text
- identify the author by profession or importance, if appropriate
- describe the purpose or main idea of the material in a **one sentence statement** that weaves together the themes from the one-sentence summaries you made while you read the material
- give an indication of your overall impression of the article or paper in general terms

**In the Body (1-2 paragraphs of 3-4 sentences each), you should:**
- provide an analytical summary of the main findings/arguments/conclusions of the article or paper
- discuss the strengths /usefulness of the material
- discuss the weaknesses/limitations/problems with the material, especially for your purposes/context
- make sufficient references to the authors of the material

**In the Conclusion (1 paragraph of 3-4 sentences), you should:**
- summarize what you have written in the Body
- make a final judgment on the value of the article indicating the balance that you see existing between the strengths and limitations of the material
- comment on the future of the issue/topic or implications of the view expressed