

# Taking a Critical Stance: Evaluation in Academic Writing

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## Book Reviews

- Book reviews are a good starting point for learning how to critique the work of others.
- Book reviews can be found in many journals across all disciplines.
- Book reviews have been an important part of academia for hundreds of years.
- Early book reviews were largely an uncritical discussion or summary of the content of a book.
- They have evolved into a highly evaluative genre, which plays a major role in the softer sciences, and a somewhat less important role in the sciences.

## Task One

What do you already know about book reviews? With your partner discuss the following questions to determine whether you agree (A), disagree (D), or don't know (?). (From Swales and Feak 2004)

- \_\_\_\_\_ 1. Published book reviews are usually strongly negative.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 2. Book reviews should always start with a summary of the book.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 3. The judgments expressed in a published book review could have career consequences.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 4. Published book reviews may be somewhat threatening for the author of the book being reviewed.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 5. Book reviews can be a good first publication for a graduate student or junior faculty member trying to build a publication record.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 6. Members of your field regularly read book reviews.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 7. Published book reviews may not only discuss issues of content, but other issues such as price or quality of production.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 8. On occasion book reviewers use the book under review as a springboard to air their own points of view on a topic.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 9. Book reviews may be written in a less formal style.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 10. Book reviews generally do not contain references to previous literature.

## Elements of a Book Review—modified from Motta-Roth (1998)

<u>General aim</u>		<u>Specifically accomplishing that aim</u>
Introducing the book	by	establishing the topic <i>and/or</i> describing potential readership <i>and/or</i> providing information about the authors <i>and/or</i> making generalizations about the topic <i>and/or</i> establishing the place of the book in the field
Outlining the book	by	highlighting the general organization of the book <i>and/or</i> describing the content of each chapter or section <i>and/or</i> referring specifically to non-text material such as graphs, tables and appendices
Highlighting parts of the book	by	providing focused evaluation by making general, positive commentary <i>and/or</i> offering specific, negative commentary
Providing final commentary and recommendations	by	commenting on price or production standards (good binding, paper quality, size) <i>and/or</i> specifying the scope of the usefulness of the book <i>and/or</i> recommending (not recommending) the book, despite limitations, if any

### Frequently Used Evaluative Adjectives

Ken Hyland's study of 160 book reviews from 8 disciplines<sup>1</sup> (2000) found that some evaluative terms cut across several disciplines, while others have a preferred status in one or two fields.

Frequently used evaluative adjectives for all 8 disciplines: *useful, important, interesting*

Frequently used evaluative nouns in the "soft" fields: *clarity, accessibility*

Frequently used evaluative adjectives in the hard sciences: *detailed, up-to-date*

On a more specific level, philosophers and applied linguists often described books as *detailed*, while philosophers and marketing specialists praised books for being *insightful* and *significant*. Books in engineering were commended for being *comprehensive* and *practical*.

For all fields the most common negative adjective was *difficult*. In the softer fields books were criticized for being *inconsistent, restricted, and misleading*.

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<sup>1</sup> Cell biology, electrical engineering, mechanical engineering, physics, marketing, applied linguistics, philosophy, and sociology

## Evaluating an Article

1. Who is the audience?
2. What is the purpose of the article?
3. What research question(s) is (are) being addressed in the article?  
(State the research question as a *yes* or *no* question. This will help you identify the focus of a paper. A question such as “Does herbal tea cause tooth decay?” can be more useful in guiding your thinking than simply stating the topic; i.e., “The paper is about herbal tea and tooth decay.”)
4. What conclusions are drawn from the research?
5. What kind of evidence is offered in support of the conclusions? Is there any evidence that could or should have been included, but was not?
6. Are the conclusions valid or plausible based on the evidence? Why or why not?
7. Are there any important assumptions underlying the article? How do these influence the conclusions?

## Beginning the Critique

- (Authors) present a plausible case that . . . . Less adequate is their discussion of . . .
- (Authors) take on the difficult task of . . . . Unfortunately, . . .
- (Authors) present an important discussion of . . . . Although we may not agree on all the issues raised in the article, we praise the authors for . . .
- The article by (Authors) is an ambitious feat of synthesis, encompassing diverse theories of . . . This effort, however, is not fully successful.
- (Authors) have written an important and timely article on . . . . Despite its many strengths there are a number of small, but important weaknesses.
- (Authors) present a compelling argument for . . . ; however,
- While the authors’ position that . . . is attractive, there are a number of weaknesses in this concept.

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