WRITING A CRITICAL REVIEW

What is a critical review?
A critical review is much more than a simple summary; it is an analysis and evaluation of a book, article, or other medium. Writing a good critical review requires that you understand the material, and that you know how to analyze and evaluate that material using appropriate criteria.

Steps to writing an effective critical review:

Reading
Skim the whole text to determine the overall thesis, structure and methodology. This will help you better understand how the different elements fit together once you begin reading carefully.

Read critically. It is not enough to simply understand what the author is saying; it is essential to challenge it. Examine how the article is structured, the types of reasons or evidence used to support the conclusions, and whether the author is reliant on underlying assumptions or theoretical frameworks. Take copious notes that reflect what the text means AND what you think about it.

Analyzing
Examine all elements. All aspects of the text—the structure, the methods, the reasons and evidence, the conclusions, and, especially, the logical connections between all of these—should be considered.

The types of questions asked will vary depending on the discipline in which you are writing, but the following samples will provide a good starting point:

Structure	What type of text is it? (For example: Is it a primary source or secondary source? Is it original research or a comment on original research?) What are the different sections and how do they fit together? Are any of the sections particularly effective (or ineffective)?
Methodology	Is the research quantitative or qualitative? Does the methodology have any weaknesses? How does the design of the study address the hypothesis?
Reasons/Evidence	What sources does the author use (interviews, peer-reviewed journals, government reports, journal entries, newspaper accounts, etc.)? What types of reasoning are employed (inductive, deductive, abductive)? What type of evidence is provided (empirical, statistical, logical, etc.)? Are there any gaps in the evidence (or reasoning)?
Conclusions	Does the data adequately support the conclusion drawn by the researcher(s)? Are other interpretations plausible? Are the conclusions dependent on a particular theoretical formulation? What does the work contribute to the field?
Logic	What assumptions does the author make? Does the author account for all of the data, or are portions left out? What alternative perspectives remain unconsidered? Are there any logical flaws in the construction of the argument?

Writing

Formulate a thesis based on your overall evaluation. A strong thesis will acknowledge both strengths and limitations.

> **E.g.** While the article reports significant research supporting the view that certain types of computer use can have a positive impact on a student's GPA, the conclusion that game playing alone can improve student achievement is based on a misinterpretation of the evidence.
> **Not:** This article misinterprets key evidence to support the conclusion that game playing can improve GPA.

Ensure that your thesis answers the assignment. If you are asked to write a review of a single text, with no outside sources, then your essay should focus strictly on the material in the text and your analysis and evaluation of it. If you are asked to write about more than one work, or to draw connections between an article or book and the course material, then your review should address these concerns.

Choose a structure that will best allow you to support your thesis within the required page constraints. The first example below works well with shorter assignments, but the risk is that too much time will be spent developing the overview, and too little time on the evaluation. The second example works better for longer reviews because it provides the relevant description with the analysis and evaluation, allowing the reader to follow the argument easily.

Two common structures used for critical reviews:

Example 1	Example 2
Introduction	Introduction (with thesis)
Overview of the text	Point 1: Explanation and evaluation
Evaluation of the text ■ Point 1 ■ Point 2 ■ Point 3 ■ Point 4 …(continue as necessary)	Point 2: Explanation and evaluation Point 3: Explanation and evaluation (continue elaborating as many points as necessary)
Conclusion	Conclusion

Important: Avoid presenting your points in a laundry-list style. Synthesize the information as much as possible.

"Laundry-List" Style of Presentation	Synthesized Argument.
The article cites several different studies in support of the argument that playing violent video games can have a positive impact on student achievement. These studies refer to educational games and other types of computer use. The argument is not logically well constructed. Educational games are not the same as violent video games. The article also ignores data indicating that people with the highest GPA are those that reported low computer use. Also, different types of computer use could include things like researching or word-processing, and these activities are very different from playing violent video games.	The evidence cited in the article does not support the overall conclusion that playing violent games improves GPA. One study only examines educational games in relation to GPA, so it is questionable whether the same findings will hold true for other types of games. Another study does not distinguish between different types of computer use, making it difficult to assess whether it is game playing or activities such as research and writing that contributed to improvements in GPA. Further, the author disregards relevant data that indicates that students with the highest GPAs are those who report low computer use, which means that a direct correlation between game playing and GPA cannot be supported.