**Criticism**

Excerpted from Harry Shaw's *A Complete Course in Freshman English (*Harper & Row*)*by the UWF Writing Lab.

Criticism is a part of everyone’s daily life. You exercise critical faculties every time you choose a meal in the cafeteria, decide how to spend the afternoon, or buy an article of clothing. You read one book in preference to another; you telephone Dorothy instead of Peggy; you choose the subway rather than the bus. All these are acts involve some sort of criticism.

In a broader and more exact sense, criticism is a thoughtful, many-sided evaluation. The word critic comes from the Greek *kritikos*, meaning a judge. Thus, criticism is a process that weighs, evaluates, and judges. Contrary to some opinion, it does not deal only with faults. Sound criticism mentions good qualities as well as bad, virtues as well as faults. It should not set out to praise or condemn; rather, it weighs faults and excellencies and then passes a considered judgment.

In writing criticism of books, plays, concerts, recitals, radio programs, and motion pictures, you should remember, therefore, that your comments must be based on knowledge. It is unfair to review a work, for example, without first having read (or listened or looked) with care and thoughtfulness. You must give whatever it is that you are reviewing a fair and thorough trial. As an impartial judge, you can do no less. At some stage, the best criticism is thoughtful, detached, impersonal, not unreasoned and biased.

But critical writing is also emotional and highly personal. As individuals, we all have prejudices of some sort as a result of our heredity and environment: race, religion, occupation, politics, education, social position, etc. We must be on guard against our prejudices, but of course it is impossible for us not to react according to our individual traits. The best criticism is an amalgam of objectivity and subjectivity; it should be impersonal, and yet it must be subjective. Anatole France argues the following:

The good critic is he who recounts the adventures of his soul in the presence of masterpieces. Objective criticism no more exists than objective art, and those who suppose that they are putting anything but themselves into their work are the dupes of the most fallacious illusion. The fact is that one never escapes from him. That indeed is one of our great misfortunes. What would we not give for the power to see, just for one moment, the heavens and earth as they appear to a fly, or to comprehend nature with the rude brain of an ape? But we are forever precluded from doing so. Unlike Tiresias, we are not able to be men and yet remember having been women. We are confined within our bodies as in a perpetual prison. The better part, it seems to me, is to admit unhesitatingly this deplorable condition and to avow that we speak of ourselves each time that we have not the resolution to remain silent.

Good criticism is subjective and is always biased to some degree, but the subjectivity and the bias should be predicated upon a sound knowledge of the material being criticized.

The foregoing remarks apply to criticism of all kinds, but it is likely that most of the reviewing that you will do in college will be of books. Essentially, the principles of all criticism are the same, but these are the questions that a good book review should specifically answer:

1. What was the author trying to do?
2. How well did the author succeed in his or her attempt?
3. What value does the attempt have?

An answer to the first question should be a discussion of the scope and purpose of the book. What material is covered? What material is stressed? What was the author’s apparent purpose in writing the book? These queries must be answered.

The second question requires comment not so much on material as on manner. What stylistic faults and excellencies does the book possess? Is it convincing, persuasive, dull? Would some readers find the book excellent, others think it inferior? What readers? Why?

The third question may be answered by a discussion of the theme and purpose of the book. Here, you may legitimately criticize an author for having written a light romance instead of a novel of social significance, or vice versa. But remember, fairness demands that you first evaluate a book in terms of what it is designed to be. Later, if you wish, you may point out the worthiness or unworthiness of the attempt.

There are three different kinds, or methods, of book reviewing. The first is the method of the reporter; that is, the reviewer reports on the book as an item of news. He tells what the book contains, perhaps in the form of a precise or resume; he tells something of the author and his method of handling material. Essentially, however, this type of review is not critical. It reports, in some detail, the observable facts about the author and contents of the book, and it does little else. Book reviewers who conduct columns in daily newspapers are usually “book reporters” rather than critics.

Another method, the one most frequently expected by college instructors, is that of combining reportorial details with some critical comment. The writer of this kind of review not only reports but also explains, interprets, and evaluates the book in terms of its material, its style, its scope, and its purpose. Such a review is ordinarily composed of about 50% summary and 50% evaluation. This method is often employed by professional reviewers in preparing copy for weekly magazines. The daily reviewer on a newspaper has time for little more than straight reporting, but the weekly reviewer has some opportunity for weighing and judging.

The third method has been called the springboard review. This type of criticism deals only slightly with the actual book under consideration; the reviewer uses it merely as a convenient starting point from which he launches into a critical essay that ranges far afield. For example, a springboard reviewer, in considering a book on war, may make a few comments about the book and then proceed to a discussion of other books on war or the dominant psychology of war novels or even to an analysis of the causes of international friction. Such critical essays may sometimes be found in monthly and quarterly magazines and in books of literary criticism.

The good review is usually a blend of these three methods. It contains some reportorial detail and some critical comment. It also compares and contrasts the book and its author with other similar or dissimilar books and authors, in an attempt to place the book and its special contribution.

The following suggestions for writing reviews may be helpful:

* Always give some indication of the contents of the book. You do not wish to write your review wholly from a reportorial angle, but ordinarily you should assume that your review will be read by a person who has not read the book. Some indication of its contents is essential.
* Select a controlling idea, and model your review around it. Obviously, it is impossible to comment upon all the ideas contained in the book or to develop fully a large number of critical points. For purposes of unity and effectiveness, choose some major theme or idea or stylistic quality of the book and discuss it thoroughly; try to relate other comments to your major point of attack by means of comparison and contrast.
* Make some use of quotations from the book. Summarizing is helpful, indeed necessary, but it does not give any indication of the actual flavor of the book. A judicious and limited use of quotations will furnish the reader of your review with a good idea of the author’s style and will also help to add compelling interest to your otherwise largely expository review. Neither the readers of your review who have read the book itself nor those who have not will be satisfied with a mere summary; well-chosen quotations appeal to everyone. Remember, however, to choose quotations carefully and use them sparingly.
* Be specific. Do not use vague terms. If you say, for example, that the style of an author is heavy, illustrate what you mean by quotation. If you say the book is well-documented, give the names of some of the references that the author has used. Your reader may be quite prepared to accept your general statements, but direct and specific illustration will more clearly convey your exact meaning.
* Do not hesitate to inject yourself and your ideas into the review. Consciously or unconsciously, you will write subjectively, anyway. Relating the thoughts that occurred to you while you were reading the book, for example, possibly will serve to make the review more interesting, less wooden. After all, one function of a review is to describe a book in the light of the reviewer’s own personality. Do not write only about your own opinions, but do not fail to give the reader an accurate and full account of your personal reactions.
* Avoid contradictions and afterthoughts. If you have criticized a book severely, do not lamely end your review by writing, “But the book does have some good qualities” or “After all, the plot itself isn’t bad.” Fairness may demand the inclusion of such statements, but they should appear as thoughts, not afterthoughts. Above all, avoid ending your review with weak statements; end it instead on a positive reiteration of your dominant impression of the book.