

Criticism

UWF Writing Lab

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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 involving 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 which weighs, evaluates, 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 criticisms of books, plays, concerts and recitals, radio programs, and motion pictures, you should remember, therefore, that your comments must be based on knowledge. It is unfair to review a book or a motion picture, for example, without first having read (or listened and 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 unreasoning 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 must be subjective. As Anatole France has said:

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 himself. 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 Tiersias, 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 which you will do in college will be of books. Essentially, the principles of all criticism are the same, but these are the questions which a good book review should specifically answer:

1. What was the author trying to do?
2. How well did he succeed in his attempt?
3. What value has the attempt?

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 writing 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 precis 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 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 is the method 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 mold your review around it. Obviously it is impossible to comment upon all the ideas contained in a 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.