Writing an Article Critique

Professors in many departments consider the article critique a valuable writing assignment. This handout briefly explains what an article critique is and what you can expect to gain from writing one. The bulk of the handout provides guidelines for writing the article critique. Though the information that follows is copied from a writing manual for political science students, most of the information is applicable to the writing of article critiques in virtually any academic field.

An article critique is a paper that evaluates an article published in an academic journal. A good critique tells the reader what point the article is trying to make and how convincingly it makes this point. Writing an article critique achieves three purposes. First, it provides you with an understanding of the information contained in a scholarly article and a familiarity with other information written on the same topic. Second, it provides you with an opportunity to apply and develop your critical thinking and writing skills as you attempt to evaluate critically a political scientist's work. Third, it helps you to improve your own writing skills as you attempt to describe the selected article's strengths and weaknesses so that your readers can clearly understand them.

The first step in writing an article critique is to select an appropriate article. Unless your instructor specifies otherwise, select an article from a scholarly journal (such as the American Political Science Review, Journal of Politics, or Southeastern Political Science Review) and not a popular or journalistic publication (such as Time or the National Review). Chapter 7 of this manual includes a substantial list of academic political science journals, but your instructor may also accept appropriate articles from academic journals in other disciplines, such as history, economics, or sociology.

Choosing an Article

Three other considerations should guide your choice of an article. First, browse article titles until you find a topic that interests you. Writing a critique will be much more satisfying if you have an interest in the topic. Hundreds of interesting journal articles are published every year. The following articles, for example, appeared in the June 1998 (26:2) issue of the Southeastern Political Science Review.

- "Activists, Contributors, and Volunteers: The Participation Puzzle," by Grant Neeley and Anthony J. Nownes
- "Religious Influences on Political Participation," by Adrian S. Clark
- "Determinants of Voter Turnout in Illinois School Referenda," by Corliss Lenz
- "Complexity, Patronage, and the Density of Interest Groups in the American States," by Barbara Morris
- "Opportunistic Foreign Policy and the Political Management of the News Media Content: The Case of Grenada," by Douglas A. Van Belle
• “Maintaining Momentum: An Overview of South Africa’s Progress Toward Democratic Consolidation,” by Robert J. Griffiths
• “Republicanizing’ Kant’s Republic: Making Politics’ Tribute to Morality Count,” by Scott Roulier
• “The ‘Culture Wars’ in the South: Partisanship, Race, and Cultural Conservatism in the 1990 North Carolina U.S. Senate Election,” by Kenneth A. Wink and Peter Laroche

The second consideration in selecting an article is your current level of knowledge. Many political science studies, for example, employ sophisticated statistical techniques. You may be better prepared to evaluate them if you have studied statistics.

The third consideration is to select a current article, one written within the last twelve months. Most material in political science is quickly superseded by new studies. Selecting a recent study will help ensure that you will be engaged in an up-to-date discussion of your topic.

**Writing the Critique**

Once you have selected and carefully read your article, you may begin to write your critique, which will cover five areas:

1. Thesis
2. Methods
3. Evidence of thesis support
4. Contribution to the literature
5. Recommendation

**Thesis**

Your first task is to find and clearly state the thesis of the article. The thesis is the main point the article is trying to make. In a 1997 article entitled “Unequal Participation: Democracy’s Unresolved Dilemma,” APSA President Arend Lijphart, Research Professor of Political Science at the University of California, San Diego, states his thesis very clearly:

Low voter turnout is a serious democratic problem for five reasons: (1) It means unequal turnout that is systematically biased against less well-to-do citizens. (2) Unequal turnout spells unequal political influence. (3) U.S. voter turnout is especially low, but, measured as percent of voting-age population, it is also relatively low in most other countries. (4) Turnout in midterm, regional, local, and supranational elections—less salient but by no means unimportant elections—tends to be especially poor. (5) Turnout appears to be declining everywhere.

Many authors, however, do not present their theses this clearly. After you have read the article, ask yourself whether you had to hunt for the thesis. Comment about the clarity of the author’s thesis presentation, and state the author’s thesis in your critique. Before proceeding with the remaining elements of your critique, consider the importance of the topic. Has the author written something that is important for us as citizens or political scientists to read?

**Methods**

In your critique, carefully answer the following questions: What methods did the author use to investigate the topic? In other words, how did the author go about supporting the thesis? Were the appropriate methods used? Did the
author’s approach to supporting the thesis make sense? Did the author employ the selected methods correctly? Did you discover any errors in the way he or she conducted the research?

Evidence of Thesis Support

In your critique, answer the following questions: What evidence did the author present in support of the thesis? What are the strengths of the evidence presented? What are the weaknesses of the evidence? On balance, how well did the author support the thesis?

Contribution to the Literature

This step will probably require you to undertake some research of your own. Using the research resources discussed in Chapters 6 and 7 of this manual, identify articles and books published on the subject of your selected article within the last five years. Browse the titles, and read perhaps half a dozen of the publications that appear to provide the best discussion of the topic. In your critique, list the most important other articles or books that have been published on your topic and then, in view of these publications, evaluate the contribution that your selected article makes to a better understanding of the subject.

Recommendation

In this section of your critique, summarize your evaluation of the article. Tell your readers several things: Who will benefit from reading this article? What will the benefit be? How important and extensive is that benefit? Clearly state your evaluation of the article in the form of a thesis for your own critique. Your thesis might be something like the following:

Arend Lijphart’s article entitled “Unequal Participation: Democracy’s Unresolved Dilemma” is the most concise and comprehensive discussion of the problem of unequal participation published in recent years. Political scientists should conscientiously confront Lijphart’s warning because he conclusively demonstrates that unequal participation presents an imminent threat to American democracy.

When writing this assignment, follow the directions for paper formats in Chapter 3 of this manual. Ask your instructor for directions concerning the length of the critique, but in the absence of further guidelines, your paper should not exceed five pages (typed, double-spaced).

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