

What makes a good critical review?

Read the topic and sample review. Then study the comments on the side.
(A copy of the original article - by Ballard & Clanchy - available on request)

Topic

Write a critical review of Chapter 2 of *Study abroad: A Manual for Asian Students*. In your review you should **summarise** the chapter and then **evaluate** it. (1,000 words)

Sample review

B. Ballard and J. Clanchy (1985). *Study abroad: A manual for Asian students* (Chapter 2: 'Cultural variations in style of thinking'). Longman: Malaysia

1 In recent years, it has become a common trend for overseas students to travel to Australia to undertake university courses. Whilst most of these students are very successful in their degrees (Hawthorne, 2000), some do experience difficulty along the way. Students find inevitably that doing all their study in English poses a significant challenge. Others find that the ways of studying can be different from what they are used to in their home educational culture.

2 Differences in educational cultures are the subject of Chapter 2 of Ballard and Clanchy's book *Study Abroad: A Manual for Asian Students*. In particular, the authors explore the question of whether students from different cultures think differently. Whilst they admit that it is difficult to draw firm conclusions here, they do think that overseas students in Australian universities "often bring different purposes to their thinking and learning" (p.9). By this, they mean that students can approach academic tasks in a manner that is different from that expected by their lecturers.

3 To support this idea, the authors present a number of case studies, in particular a Japanese economics student's response to the following essay topic: Compare Friedman's views of economic policy in post-war Europe with those of Samuelson. This student's essay consisted mainly of biographical information about the two theorists without providing any details about their respective views. Clearly this approach was at odds with that expected by the lecturer. The student later explained that his response would be the required approach to such a task in a Japanese university.

4 In explaining this mismatch of approaches, Ballard and Clanchy propose that there are three fundamentally different learning styles. The first of these is a "reproductive" approach. This involves students learning "by memorizing information, solving problems and following procedures set by the teacher" (p.11). According to the authors, these types of activities are typical of high school education in Australia. The second approach is an "analytical" one and is thought to be typical of Australian tertiary education. At this level students are expected "to question and think critically about knowledge" (p.11). Finally at post-graduate level, students are required to do independent research and be original in their approach to knowledge. This is described as a "speculative" approach. The authors believe that education systems in Asian countries tend to emphasise the first of these approaches i.e. "reproduction". Therefore, when Asian students study in Australia they generally need to adjust their approach and learn to be more critical and analytical. The problems in the economics essay quoted above can therefore be explained in terms of the student's failure to adjust his approach.

5 To reinforce their views that these cultural differences in thinking exist, the authors refer to the work of Robert Kaplan. Kaplan argues that there are five distinct patterns for structuring an expository paragraph. Of particular interest here is the contrast he establishes between the English pattern, which he calls "linear" - "moving directly from the central idea to explanations and examples" - and the Oriental pattern, described as an "approach by indirection" - "sentences moving round the topic and avoiding any explicit judgement or conclusion" (p.15)

1. Analysing the topic

Notice how this review topic is asking students to do two things - to **summarise** a text (in this case a book chapter) and then to **evaluate** it. This is what most review tasks will require you to do - though you may find some variation on this theme. It's important to always read the topic instructions carefully.

Hint: When you are reading a text to be reviewed - keep the following two questions uppermost in your mind:

- What is this text saying? (summary);
- What do I think about what it's saying? (evaluation)

2. The text being reviewed

Notice how this review begins with the full bibliographical information about the text being reviewed - author, date, title publisher, place etc.

Hint: Always commence your review with this information.

3. Introduction

Rather than going straight into reviewing the text, notice how this student writer has begun by introducing the broad issue that the text is addressing. In this case it is the problems that international students can experience in Australian universities.

Hint: Think about how you can relate the text you are reviewing to its broader context.

4. Summarising the text (see paragraphs 2-6)

As we noted, one of the main components of a review is to **summarise** the original text. A good summary like this one will do the following:

- accurately represent the ideas in the original text
- focus on the more important ideas
- be perfectly understandable to someone who has not read the original

How long should a summary section be? It will depend on the required length of the review.

Hint: In a well-constructed review the summary section will be no longer than the evaluation section that follows it.

5. Summarising the text -

A) introducing the text (par. 2)

Notice that this paragraph gives an **overview** of the text by introducing:

- the text and its authors
- the main content covered in the text (issue of whether students from different educational cultures think differently)
- the authors' main argument (that overseas students can bring different 'purposes' to their study)

Hint: Of these three elements, you will need to put most thought into the third. It is very important to give a precise statement of what you think the principal argument in the text is. Sometimes this can be very difficult!

6. Summarising the text -

B) summarising the supporting evidence (par. 3-5)

Many academic texts that you read - and may be required to review - can be thought of as presenting:

- a main argument
- evidence to support that argument

You will notice that paragraphs 3-5 outline some of the main **evidence** Ballard and Clanchy provide to support their argument.

Hint: When you are reading a text to be reviewed, think hard about this connection between main argument + evidence. Your subsequent evaluation of the text will be concerned in part with how well you think this connection has been established.

Paragraphs

Organise your review into paragraphs and try to keep these to a reasonable length. All paragraphs in this review are at least 4-5 sentences long.

Citations (Hawthorne, 2000)

Citations are used to indicate any additional texts you have referred to. Full bibliographical information for these texts is provided in a list of references at end. You do not need to provide citations for the actual text being reviewed.

Italics 1

Use italics for the titles of any texts.

Referring to the authors

In a review, you will need to refer to the author(s) frequently - to make it clear that these are *their* ideas and not *yours*. You will notice in the summary section here, the authors are mentioned in about every second sentence. In making these references, you may want to vary the language eg. use names (*Ballard and Clanchy*), nouns (*the authors, writers*); pronouns (*they*) etc.

"Quoting"

When you quote from the text you need to use quotation marks, and indicate the exact page number. In a review, you should avoid doing too much quoting - opt mainly for paraphrase. Save any quotes for the especially important ideas in the text.

Reporting expressions

Along with referring to the authors, you will need to use a variety of reporting expressions - to introduce their ideas, and also to indicate what they do in their text eg.

- *the authors explore the question...*
- *they admit that...*
- *they do think that...*
- *they mean that...*
- *To support this idea, the authors present a number of case studies*
- *Ballard and Clanchy propose that...*

Embedded Summary

In their text, Ballard and Clanchy refer to the ideas of Kaplan. Notice how this is handled in the student's summary. This is in effect a summary of a summary.

To reinforce their views that these cultural differences in thinking exist, the authors refer to the work of Robert Kaplan. Kaplan argues that ...

"Scare quotes"

You use these to distance yourself from certain language. eg. when you are using an informal expression, or a term used by others that you don't necessarily agree with.

Essay Commentary

7. Summarising the text – C) rounding off (par. 6)

The conclusion of your summary will often reflect the concluding material that you find in the original text. In this case, it is what the authors see as the **implications** of their argument.

Hint: Remember that in all of the summary section, it is the ideas of the author only that you are presenting - not your own! This comes next in the evaluation section.

8. Evaluating the text (par. 7-11)

The other main requirement of a critical review is to provide an **evaluation** of the original text. You will notice that the remainder of the review is concerned with this. The purpose of evaluation is broadly for you to say what you think about the text – its strengths and weaknesses; what's interesting about it – what not so; how much you are persuaded by it; how much it has contributed to your understanding of the issue etc.

Hint: It is most important that you are able to provide a cogent response to any text you are reviewing. As you are reading, make a note of any impressions you have of it. Some of these can be worked subsequently into well-supported evaluative statements.

9. Evaluating the text – i) negative comments (par. 7-10)

You will notice that this student reviewer has chosen to focus on certain problems she has identified in the text – but this of course is only one person's impression. (Note that being 'critical' in the university context does not necessarily mean being 'negative').

The student has been critical of the text on the basis of a number of **criteria** ie.

- **limited evidence** to support main argument (par 7)
- **cultural bias** in main argument - and that of Kaplan (par 8-9)
- **oversimplification** in Kaplan model (par 9)
- **lack of logic** in implications of main argument (par 10)

Hint: It is important for you to develop a sense of the criteria that you can draw on in evaluating texts in your field. Those above are just a few.

10. Evaluating the text – ii) positive comments (par. 11)

Unless you feel that a text has no redeeming features at all, it is always a good idea to get some balance in your commentary. Notice that the criterion applied here is one of the 'usefulness' of the text – its intention to assist students.

Hint: It is always good to be able to give an overall impression of the text. Before writing the review, try to decide whether your impression is overall a favourable or unfavourable one – and then organise your material accordingly.

12. Editing

You may have noticed that the review is free of spelling, typographical and grammatical errors.

Hint: always read your work very carefully before you submit it. Avoid doing your editing on the screen. Always print out and edit from a hard copy.

6

Ballard and Clanchy therefore suggest that students intending to study in English-speaking countries need to do more than develop their English language competence. They also need to adapt their study behaviour and in particular “to develop a more analytical and critical approach to learning” (p.17).

7

How convincing though, is this idea that Asian students think in a fundamentally different way? First of all we need to consider the evidence Ballard and Clanchy draw on to support this view. The case studies presented seem persuasive, but it must be remembered that these are only small in number and we do not know how typical they are. The case of the Japanese student for example, may be quite unusual. In my view, more systematic and comprehensive research of this issue is needed before any firm conclusions can be drawn. It would be interesting for example to try the essay topic on a large group of students and find out how they would respond to it. The authors of the chapter can therefore be criticized here for a lack of evidence to support this view.

8

Another questionable aspect of this article is its implied cultural bias. Although the authors do not state that the methods of Australian education are superior, this is what is implied from their model of learning styles. Whereas it is suggested that Australian students progress from a “reproductive” approach to an “analytical” approach, the authors seem to think that Asian education does not move beyond this “reproductive” stage. Are Asian tertiary students then to consider themselves only as the equals of Australian secondary students? By implication, Asian education is seen as an undeveloped form.

9

This same cultural bias can also be found in the Kaplan material. His characterisation of the English pattern as “linear” in contrast to the “circularity” of the Asian pattern implies that he finds the former more logical. Scholars from Asian countries, which have their own rich traditions of learning, may regard this judgement as offensive. Kaplan may also be accused of serious oversimplification when he speaks of a single Oriental style of thinking. Asia consists of many cultures and languages which cannot be reduced into one uniform pattern. By contrast he proposes that there are *three* distinct European patterns - English, Russian and Romance

10

A final shortcoming in the article is the authors' portrayal of how students are able to adjust their approaches to learning. If we accept the view that patterns of thinking are conditioned by language and education from an early age, then it is fair to assume that the process of adjustment to a new pattern would take a good deal of time and effort. However in the case of the Japanese student, the authors suggest that he only needed to recognise that he was approaching essay tasks in the wrong way and “then he was able to make the necessary shifts without any great difficulty” (p. 11). This does not sound very plausible.

11

Despite these criticisms, Ballard and Clanchy's article still has some value and we need to judge it in terms of the authors' purpose in writing it. It is not intended to be a rigorous piece of academic work, but is intended mainly to assist students in preparing for overseas study. We can therefore understand why the authors choose to be positive about Asian students' capacity for adjustment, and why most cases are presented ultimately as success stories. The issue of how cultural differences affect academic performance nevertheless, remains a complex one, and further research is no doubt required before we can gain a full understanding of it.

References

Hawthorne, L. (1999). 'Rethinking the impact of cultural difference on learning: The evidence for asset versus deficit models'. *Proceedings of LAS conference*, Melbourne.

Academic Style and Conventions

Signalling the shift to evaluation

It is very important to signal when the **summary** of the text has stopped, and when the **evaluation** has begun. Notice that it is done here by starting a new paragraph, and leading off with a question.

Signalling type of evaluation 1

It is important to make the nature of your evaluation clear – whether your comments are favourable or not. Notice the range of words and expressions used in paragraphs 7-10 to signal a negative response to material:

The authors can be criticised ...
Another questionable aspect ...
This same cultural bias can be found ...
Kaplan may also be accused of ...
A final shortcoming in the article is ...

Italics 3 – for emphasis

Use italics when you want to emphasise a word or expression

Signalling type of evaluation 2

Notice how the positive evaluation in paragraph 11 is explicitly signalled:

Despite these criticisms, Ballard and Clanchy's article still has value...

List of references

Only include in this **additional** texts you have referred to.

11. Structure of the review

This sample review is structured in a very conventional way, with a clear division of:

- **summary** of the text (paragraphs 2-6).
- **evaluation** of the text
 - negative (par. 7-10)
 - positive (par. 11).

There are other possibilities. For example, you may wish to summarise the **first section** of a text and then evaluate it, and then move on to the **second section** and evaluate that etc.

Hint: Whichever structure you use, it's important that you keep the functions of summary and evaluation clearly distinct. The reader needs to be in no doubt about when you are presenting the ideas *IN* the text, and when you are presenting your ideas *ABOUT* the text.