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# Critical Reading and Critique

# 2

## CRITICAL READING

When writing papers in college, you are often called on to respond critically to source materials. Critical reading requires the abilities to both summarize and evaluate a presentation. As you have seen in Chapter 1, a *summary* is a brief restatement in your own words of the content of a passage. An *evaluation*, however, is a more difficult matter.

In your college work, you read to gain and *use* new information; but as sources are not equally valid or equally useful, you must learn to distinguish critically among them by evaluating them.

There is no ready-made formula for determining validity. Critical reading and its written equivalent—the *critique*—require discernment, sensitivity, imagination, knowledge of the subject, and above all, willingness to become involved in what you read. These skills cannot be taken for granted and are developed only through repeated practice. You must begin somewhere, though, and we recommend that you start by posing two broad categories of questions about passages, articles, and books that you read: (1) What is the author's purpose in writing? Does he or she succeed in this purpose? (2) To what extent do you agree with the author?

### Question Category 1: What Is the Author's Purpose in Writing? Does the Author Succeed in This Purpose?

All critical reading *begins with an accurate summary*. Thus before attempting an evaluation, you must be able to locate an author's thesis and identify the selection's content and structure. You must understand the author's *purpose*. Authors write to inform, to persuade, and to entertain. A given piece may be primarily *informative* (a summary of the research on cloning), primarily *persuasive* (an argument on why the government must do something to alleviate homelessness), or primarily *entertaining* (a play about the frustrations of young lovers). Or it may be all three (as in John Steinbeck's novel *The Grapes of Wrath*, which revolves around migrant workers during the Great Depression). Sometimes, authors are not fully conscious of their purpose. Sometimes their purpose changes as they write. Also, more than one purpose can overlap: An essay may need to inform the reader about an issue in order to make a persuasive point. But if the finished piece is coherent, it will have a primary reason for having been written, and it should be apparent that the author is attempting primarily to inform, persuade, or entertain a particular audience. To identify this primary reason—this purpose—is your first job as a critical reader. Your

### WHERE DO WE FIND WRITTEN CRITIQUES?

*Here are a few types of writing that involve critique:*

#### **Academic Writing**

- **Research papers.** Critique sources in order to establish their usefulness.
- **Position papers.** Stake out a position by critiquing other positions.
- **Book reviews.** Combine summary with critique.
- **Essay exams.** Demonstrate understanding of course material by critiquing it.

#### **Workplace Writing**

- **Legal briefs and legal arguments.** Critique previous rulings or arguments made by opposing counsel.
- **Business plans and proposals.** Critique other, less cost-effective approaches.
- **Policy briefs.** Communicate failings of policies and legislation through critique.

next job is to determine how successful the author has been. As a critical reader, you bring different criteria, or standards of judgment, to bear when you read pieces intended to inform, persuade, or entertain.

### Writing to Inform

A piece intended to inform will provide definitions, describe or report on a process, recount a story, give historical background, and/or provide facts and figures. An informational piece responds to questions such as the following:

- What (or who) is \_\_\_\_\_?
- How does \_\_\_\_\_ work?
- What is the controversy or problem about?
- What happened?
- How and why did it happen?
- What were the results?
- What are the arguments for and against \_\_\_\_\_?

To the extent that an author answers these and related questions and the answers are a matter of verifiable record (you could check for accuracy if you had the time and inclination), the selection is intended to inform. Having

determined this, you can organize your response by considering three other criteria: accuracy, significance, and fair interpretation of information.

### *Evaluating Informative Writing*

**Accuracy of Information.** If you are going to use any of the information presented, you must be satisfied that it is trustworthy. One of your responsibilities as a critical reader, then, is to find out if it is accurate. This means you should check facts against other sources. Government publications are often good resources for verifying facts about political legislation, population data, crime statistics, and the like. You can also search key terms in library databases and on the Web. Since material on the Web is essentially “self-published,” however, you must be especially vigilant in assessing its legitimacy. In Chapter 7, which focuses on research, we provide a more detailed discussion of how you should approach Web sources. A wealth of useful information is now available on the Internet—but there is also a tremendous amount of misinformation, distorted “facts,” and unsupported opinion.

**Significance of Information.** One useful question that you can ask about a reading is “So what?” In the case of selections that attempt to inform, you may reasonably wonder whether the information makes a difference. What can the person who is reading gain from this information? How is knowledge advanced by the publication of this material? Is the information of importance to you or to others in a particular audience? Why or why not?

**Fair Interpretation of Information.** At times you will read reports, the sole function of which is to relate raw data or information. In these cases, you will build your response on the two questions in category 1, introduced on page 45: What is the author’s purpose in writing? Does she or he succeed in this purpose? More frequently, once an author has presented information, he or she will attempt to evaluate or interpret it—which is only reasonable, since information that has not been evaluated or interpreted is of little use. One of your tasks as a critical reader is to make a distinction between the author’s presentation of facts and figures and his or her attempts to evaluate them. Watch for shifts from straightforward descriptions of factual information (“20 percent of the population”) to assertions about what this information means (“*a mere* 20 percent of the population”), what its implications are, and so on. Pay attention to whether the logic with which the author connects interpretation with facts is sound. You may find that the information is valuable but the interpretation is not. Perhaps the author’s conclusions are not justified. Could you offer a contrary explanation for the same facts? Does more information need to be gathered before firm conclusions can be drawn? Why?

### **Writing to Persuade**

Writing is frequently intended to persuade—that is, to influence the reader’s thinking. To make a persuasive case, the writer must begin with an assertion that is arguable, some statement about which reasonable people could

disagree. Such an assertion, when it serves as the essential organizing principle of the article or book, is called a *thesis*. Here are two examples:

Because they do not speak English, many children in this affluent land are being denied their fundamental right to equal educational opportunity.

Bilingual education, which has been stridently promoted by a small group of activists with their own agenda, is detrimental to the very students it is supposed to serve.

Thesis statements such as these—and the subsequent assertions used to help support them—represent conclusions that authors have drawn as a result of researching and thinking about an issue. You go through the same process yourself when you write persuasive papers or critiques. And just as you are entitled to critically evaluate the assertions of authors you read, so your professors—and other students—are entitled to evaluate *your* assertions, whether they be encountered as written arguments or as comments made in class discussion.

Keep in mind that writers organize arguments by arranging evidence to support one conclusion and oppose (or dismiss) another. You can assess the validity of the argument and the conclusion by determining whether the author has (1) clearly defined key terms, (2) used information fairly, (3) argued logically and not fallaciously (see pages 49–54).

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**EXERCISE 2.1***Informative and Persuasive Thesis Statements*

With a partner from your class, write one informative and one persuasive thesis statement for *three* of the following topics:

- School prayer
- Gun control
- Sex education in schools
- Grammar instruction in English class
- Violent lyrics in music
- Teaching computer skills in primary schools
- Curfews in college dormitories
- Course registration procedures

For example, for the topic *school prayer*, your informative thesis statement might read this way:

Both advocates and opponents of school prayer frame their position as a matter of freedom.

Your persuasive thesis statement might be worded as follows:

As long as schools don't dictate what kinds of prayers students should say, then school prayer should be allowed and even encouraged.

Don't worry about taking a position that you agree with or feel you could support. The exercise doesn't require that you write an essay at this point.

### *Evaluating Persuasive Writing*

Read on pages 484–87 the argument “Too Much of a Good Thing,” by Greg Crister, a recommendation to curtail the steep, recent rise in childhood obesity. We will illustrate our discussion on defining terms, using information fairly, and arguing logically by referring to Crister's argument. The example critique that follows these illustrations will be based on this same argument.

### **EXERCISE 2.2**

#### *Critical Reading Practice*

Before continuing with the chapter's reading, look back at the Critical Reading for Summary box on page 6 of Chapter 1. Use each of the guidelines listed there to examine the essay by Greg Crister on pages 484–87. Note in the margins of the selection, or on a separate sheet of paper, the essay's main point, subpoints, and use of examples.

### *Persuasive Strategies*

**Clearly Defined Terms.** The validity of an argument depends to some degree on how carefully an author has defined key terms. Take the assertion, for example, that American society must be grounded in “family values.” Just what do people who use this phrase mean by it? The validity of their argument depends on whether they and their readers agree on a definition of “family values”—as well as what it means to be “grounded in” family values. If an author writes that in the recent past, “America's elites accepted as a matter of course that a free society can sustain itself only through virtue and temperance in the people” (Charles Murray, “The Coming White Underclass,” *Wall Street Journal*, 20 Oct. 1993), readers need to know what, exactly, the author means by “elites” and by “virtue and temperance” before they can assess the validity of the argument. In such cases, the success of the argument—its ability to persuade—hinges on the definition of a term. So, in responding to an argument, be sure you (and the author) are clear on what exactly is being argued. Only then can you respond to the logic of the argument, to the author's use of evidence, and to the author's conclusions.

Crister supports his argument for launching a campaign to end overconsumption by stating that efforts to stigmatize “unhealthful behaviors . . . conform with what we know about effective health messages.” While Crister does provide examples of what he considers “effective health messages,” his definition of *effective* is open to debate. By what measures have “the campaign against unsafe sex and the campaign against smoking” been effective? The reader might well point to level HIV infection rates in the United States and continuing billion-dollar profits by tobacco companies and challenge Crister’s definition of *effective*.

**Fair Use of Information.** Information is used as evidence in support of arguments. When you encounter such evidence, ask yourself two questions: (1) Is the information accurate and up-to-date? At least a portion of an argument becomes invalid if the information used to support it is inaccurate or out-of-date. (2) Has the author cited *representative* information? The evidence used in an argument must be presented in a spirit of fair play. An author is less than ethical who presents only evidence favoring his views when he is well aware that contrary evidence exists. For instance, it would be dishonest to argue that an economic recession is imminent and to cite only indicators of economic downturn while ignoring and failing to cite contrary (positive) evidence.

Crister uses the information he cites fairly and accurately: He presents statistics in paragraph 2 on the rise of childhood obesity; he refers to a published study in paragraph 6 to refute the assertion that “kids know when they are full”; and he cites studies again in paragraphs 8 and 9. However, Crister chooses not to use, let alone mention, other information that bears on the topic of weight gain. For example, he argues that we should create an anti-obesity campaign that stigmatizes the behavior of those who lack the willpower to stop eating. The assumption: A lack of willpower is the primary reason people are obese. Whether or not this view is correct, a great deal of information (scientific studies included) suggests that other causes may be implicated in obesity. By not raising the possibility that genes or hormones, for instance, might play a role, information about which Crister is undoubtedly aware, he fails to present full and representative information on his chosen topic. True, the op-ed piece is a brief form, leaving not much room to develop an argument. Still, Crister leaves the impression that he has cited the most pertinent information on combating obesity when, in fact, he has disregarded a great deal of information.

### *Logical Argumentation: Avoiding Logical Fallacies*

At some point, you will need to respond to the logic of the argument itself. To be convincing, an argument should be governed by principles of *logic*—clear and orderly thinking. This does *not* mean that an argument should not be biased. A biased argument—that is, an argument weighted toward one point of view and against others, which is in fact the nature of argument—may be valid as long as it is logically sound.

Several examples of faulty thinking and logical fallacies to watch for follow.

**Emotionally Loaded Terms.** Writers sometimes attempt to sway readers by using emotionally charged words—words with positive connotations to sway readers to their own point of view (e.g., “family values”) or words with negative connotations to sway readers away from the opposing point of view. The fact that an author uses emotionally loaded terms does not necessarily invalidate the argument. Emotional appeals are perfectly legitimate and time-honored modes of persuasion. But in academic writing, which is grounded in logical argumentation, they should not be the *only* means of persuasion. You should be sensitive to *how* emotionally loaded terms are being used. In particular, are they being used deceptively or to hide the essential facts?

Crister’s use of the word *gluttony* inserts an emotionally charged, moralizing tone into his argument. Gluttony is one of the “seven deadly sins” that, for centuries, people have been warned against committing, so destructive are they of character. Crister takes pains to say that he is no moralist (“no one should be stigmatized for being overweight”), but that claim is made false by his introduction of a “sin” into a discussion about public health. Crister operates with a value judgment that he does not fully want to own. Critical readers might legitimately object to the notion that overeating is a “sin” that ought to be stigmatized.

**Ad Hominem Argument.** In an *ad hominem* argument, the writer rejects opposing views by attacking the person who holds them. By calling opponents names, an author avoids the issue. Consider this excerpt from a political speech:

I could more easily accept my opponent’s plan to increase revenues by collecting on delinquent tax bills if he had paid more than a hundred dollars in state taxes in each of the past three years. But the fact is, he’s a millionaire with a millionaire’s tax shelters. This man hasn’t paid a wooden nickel for the state services he and his family depend on. So I ask you: Is *he* the one to be talking about taxes to *us*?

It could well be that the opponent has paid virtually no state taxes for three years; but this fact has nothing to do with, and is a ploy to divert attention from, the merits of a specific proposal for increasing revenues. The proposal is lost in the attack against the man himself, an attack that violates the principles of logic. Writers (and speakers) must make their points by citing evidence in support of their views and by challenging contrary evidence.

**Faulty Cause and Effect.** The fact that one event precedes another in time does not mean that the first event has caused the second. An example: Fish begin dying by the thousands in a lake near your hometown. An environmental group immediately cites chemical dumping by several manufacturing plants as the cause. But other causes are possible: A disease might have affected the fish; the growth of algae might have contributed to the deaths; or acid rain might be a factor. The origins of an event are usually complex and are not always traceable to a single cause. So you must carefully examine cause-and-effect reasoning when you find a writer using it. In Latin, this fallacy is known as *post hoc, ergo propter hoc* (“after this, therefore because of this”).

**TONE**

Tone refers to the overall emotional effect produced by the writer's choice of language. Writers might use especially emphatic words to create a tone: A film reviewer might refer to a "magnificent performance" or a columnist might criticize "sleazeball politics."

These are extreme examples of tone; but tone can be more subtle, particularly if the writer makes a special effort *not* to inject emotion into the writing. As we've indicated above in the section on emotionally loaded terms, the fact that a writer's tone is highly emotional does not necessarily mean that the writer's argument is invalid. Conversely, a neutral tone does not ensure an argument's validity.

Note that many instructors discourage student writing that projects a highly emotional tone, considering it inappropriate for academic or preprofessional work. (One sure sign of emotion: the exclamation mark, which should be used sparingly.)

Crister claims in this argument that dietary restraint will help reduce childhood obesity. Readers familiar with the literature on obesity know that a debate exists concerning the causes of the condition. For instance, some obese people may eat as little as their thin friends do but still lose no weight. For them, it is clear, lack of willpower does not contribute to their weight problems. Genes and body chemistry may play causal roles, but Crister mentions no causes other than lack of willpower. Asserting that one cause leads to an effect—or failing to assert that multiple causes do—gives readers the right to question the logic of an argument.

**Either/Or Reasoning.** Either/or reasoning also results from an unwillingness to recognize complexity. If an author analyzes a problem and offers only two courses of action, one of which he or she refutes, then you are entitled to object that the other is not thereby true. Usually, several other options (at the very least) are possible. For whatever reason, the author has chosen to overlook them. As an example, suppose you are reading a selection on genetic engineering and the author builds an argument on the basis of the following:

Research in gene splicing is at a crossroads: Either scientists will be carefully monitored by civil authorities and their efforts limited to acceptable applications, such as disease control; or, lacking regulatory guidelines, scientists will set their own ethical standards and begin programs in embryonic manipulation that, however well intended, exceed the proper limits of human knowledge.

Certainly, other possibilities for genetic engineering exist beyond the two mentioned here. But the author limits debate by establishing an either/or



choice. Such limitation is artificial and does not allow for complexity. As a critical reader, be on the alert for either/or reasoning.

**Hasty Generalization.** Writers are guilty of hasty generalization when they draw their conclusions from too little evidence or from unrepresentative evidence. To argue that scientists should not proceed with the human genome project because a recent editorial urged that the project be abandoned is to make a hasty generalization. This lone editorial may be unrepresentative of the views of most individuals—both scientists and laypeople—who have studied and written about the matter. To argue that one should never obey authority because Stanley Milgram’s Yale University experiments in the 1960s show the dangers of obedience is to ignore the fact that Milgram’s experiment was concerned primarily with obedience to *immoral* authority. Thus, the experimental situation was unrepresentative of most routine demands for obedience—for example, to obey a parental rule or to comply with a summons for jury duty—and a conclusion about the malevolence of all authority would be a hasty generalization.

**False Analogy.** Comparing one person, event, or issue to another may be illuminating, but it may also be confusing or misleading. Differences between the two may be more significant than the similarities, and conclusions drawn from one may not necessarily apply to the other. A writer who argues that it is reasonable to quarantine people with AIDS because quarantine has been effective in preventing the spread of smallpox is assuming an analogy between AIDS and smallpox that (because of the differences between the two diseases) is not valid.

A false analogy can also be found in Crister’s comparison between a proposed campaign to stigmatize obesity and “highly effective” campaigns that stigmatize unsafe sex and smoking (paragraph 4), which suggests that obesity is fundamentally similar to unsafe sex and smoking. Crister assumes that all three damaging behaviors have similar causes (i.e., lack of self-restraint) that can be addressed using similar means (campaigns to stigmatize). But if the analogy between obesity and smoking or unsafe sex breaks down because we find that their causes differ (and research is far from conclusive on the matter), then readers have no reason to agree with Crister that campaigns that reduce smoking and unsafe sex will help to reduce obesity.

**Begging the Question.** To beg the question is to assume as a proven fact the very thesis being argued. To assert, for example, that America is not in decline because it is as strong and prosperous as ever is not to prove anything: It is merely to repeat the claim in different words. This fallacy is also known as *circular reasoning*.

In one sense, when Crister advocates restraint to lower the incidence of obesity, he is doing an admirable job. He raises and rebuts two arguments against urging restraint on those who weigh too much (in paragraphs 3–7) and then argues directly that restraint is a successful strategy in combating obesity (in paragraphs 8–9). But Crister also assumes that lack of restraint

alone is primarily the cause of obesity. Given the volume of compelling evidence (which he does not mention) that genes and other factors may play a role in weight gain, he would do well to argue—and not assume—that lack of restraint is a primary reason people gain weight. But he assumes the validity of this important point instead of proving it. He also assumes the validity of two lesser points: (1) that the campaigns against unsafe sex and smoking have been effective; and (2) that obesity is a condition comparable to unsafe sex and smoking and, thus, a condition that would benefit from campaigns to stigmatize unhealthy behaviors.

**Non Sequitur.** *Non sequitur* is Latin for “it does not follow”; the term is used to describe a conclusion that does not logically follow from a premise. “Since minorities have made such great strides in the past few decades,” a writer may argue, “we no longer need affirmative action programs.” Aside from the fact that the premise itself is arguable (*have* minorities made such great strides?), it does not follow that because minorities *may* have made great strides, there is no further need for affirmative action programs.

**Oversimplification.** Be alert for writers who offer easy solutions to complicated problems. “America’s economy will be strong again if we all ‘buy American,’” a politician may argue. But the problems of America’s economy are complex and cannot be solved by a slogan or a simple change in buying habits. Likewise, a writer who argues that we should ban genetic engineering assumes that simple solutions (“just say ‘no’”) will be sufficient to deal with the complex moral dilemmas raised by this new technology.

For example, Crister does consider how causes other than lack of willpower may contribute to obesity. This is not to say that a lack of restraint plays no valid or even major role in weight gain. People can and should learn to say “no” to supersized fries. But to the extent Crister does not acknowledge other causes of obesity, he leaves himself open to the charge of oversimplification. His proposed “campaign against over-consumption” is one solution. It will not alone solve the obesity problem.

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**EXERCISE 2.3***Understanding Logical Fallacies*

Make a list of the nine logical fallacies discussed in the last section. Briefly define each one in your own words. Then, in a group of three or four classmates, refer to your definitions and the examples we’ve provided for each logical fallacy. Collaborate with your group to find or invent examples for each of the fallacies. Compare your examples with those generated by the other groups in your class.

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## Writing to Entertain

Authors write not only to inform and persuade but also to entertain. One response to entertainment is a hearty laugh, but it is possible to entertain without laughter: A good book or play or poem may prompt you to reflect,

grow wistful, become elated, get angry. Laughter is only one of many possible reactions. As with a response to an informative piece or an argument, your response to an essay, poem, story, play, novel, or film should be precisely stated and carefully developed. Ask yourself some of the following questions (you won't have space to explore all of them, but try to consider some of the most important): Did I care for the portrayal of a certain character? Did that character (or a group of characters united by occupation, age, ethnicity, etc.) seem overly sentimental, for example, or heroic? Did his adversaries seem too villainous or stupid? Were the situations believable? Was the action interesting or merely formulaic? Was the theme developed subtly or powerfully, or did the work come across as preachy or shrill? Did the action at the end of the work follow plausibly from what had come before? Was the language fresh and incisive or stale and predictable? Explain as specifically as possible what elements of the work seemed effective or ineffective and why. Offer an overall assessment, elaborating on your views.

## Question Category 2: To What Extent Do You Agree or Disagree with the Author?

When formulating a critical response to a source, try to distinguish your evaluation of the author's purpose and success at achieving that purpose from your agreement or disagreement with the author's views. The distinction allows you to respond to a piece of writing on its merits. As an unbiased, evenhanded critic, you evaluate an author's clarity of presentation, use of evidence, and adherence to principles of logic. To what extent has the author succeeded in achieving his or her purpose? Still withholding judgment, offer your assessment and give the author (in effect) a grade. Significantly, your assessment of the presentation may not coincide with your views of the author's conclusions: You may agree with an author entirely but feel that the presentation is superficial; you may find the author's logic and use of evidence to be rock solid but at the same time may resist certain conclusions. A critical evaluation works well when it is conducted in two parts. After evaluating the author's purpose and design for achieving that purpose, respond to the author's main assertions. In doing so, you'll want to identify points of agreement and disagreement and also evaluate assumptions.

### *Identify Points of Agreement and Disagreement*

Be precise in identifying points of agreement and disagreement with an author. You should state as clearly as possible what *you* believe, and an effective way of doing this is to define your position in relation to that presented in the piece. Whether you agree enthusiastically, disagree, or agree with reservations, you can organize your reactions in two parts: (1) summarize the author's position; and (2) state your own position and elaborate on your reasons for holding it. The elaboration, in effect, becomes an argument itself, and this is true regardless of the position you take. An opinion is effective when you support it by supplying evidence. Without such evidence, opinions cannot be authoritative. "I thought the article on inflation was lousy." Why?

"I just thought so, that's all." This opinion is worthless because the criticism is imprecise: The critic has taken neither the time to read the article carefully nor the time to explore his or her own reactions carefully.

### EXERCISE 2.4

#### *Exploring Your Viewpoints—in Three Paragraphs*

Go to a Web site that presents short persuasive essays on current social issues, such as *reason.com*, *opinion-pages.org*, *drudgereport.com*, or *Speakout.com*. Or go to an Internet search engine and type in a social issue together with the word "articles," "editorials," or "opinion," and see what you find. Locate a selection on a topic of interest that takes a clear, argumentative position. Write one paragraph summarizing the author's key argument. Write two paragraphs articulating your agreement or disagreement with the author. (Devote each paragraph to a *single* point of agreement or disagreement.) Be sure to explain why you think or feel the way you do and, wherever possible, cite relevant evidence—from your reading, experience, or observation.

#### *Explore the Reasons for Agreement and Disagreement: Evaluate Assumptions*

One way of elaborating your reactions to a reading is to explore the underlying *reasons* for agreement and disagreement. Your reactions are based largely on assumptions that you hold and how these assumptions compare with the author's. An *assumption* is a fundamental statement about the world and its operations that you take to be true. A writer's assumptions may be explicitly stated; but just as often assumptions are implicit and you will have to "ferret them out"—that is, to infer them. Consider an example:

*In vitro* fertilization and embryo transfer are brought about outside the bodies of the couple through actions of third parties whose competence and technical activity determine the success of the procedure. Such fertilization entrusts the life and identity of the embryo into the power of doctors and biologists and establishes the domination of technology over the origin and destiny of the human person. Such a relationship of domination is in itself contrary to the dignity and equality that must be common to parents and children.\*

This paragraph is quoted from the February 1987 Vatican document on artificial procreation. Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, principal author of the docu-

\* From the Vatican document *Instruction on Respect for Human Life in Its Origin and on the Dignity of Procreation*, given at Rome, from the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, 22 Feb. 1987, as presented in *Origins: N.C. Documentary Service* 16.40 (19 Mar. 1987): 707.

ment, makes an implicit assumption in this paragraph: No good can come of the domination of technology over conception. The use of technology to bring about conception is morally wrong. Yet thousands of childless couples, Roman Catholics included, have rejected this assumption in favor of its opposite: Conception technology is an aid to the barren couple; far from creating a relationship of unequals, the technology brings children into the world who will be welcomed with joy and love.

Assumptions provide the foundation on which entire presentations are built. If you find an author's assumptions invalid—that is, not supported by factual evidence—or if you disagree with value-based assumptions underlying an author's positions, you may well disagree with conclusions that follow from these assumptions. The author of a book on developing nations may include a section outlining the resources and time that will be required to industrialize a particular country and so upgrade its general welfare. Her assumption—that industrialization in that particular country will ensure or even affect the general welfare—may or may not be valid. If you do not share the assumption, in your eyes the rationale for the entire book may be undermined.

How do you determine the validity of assumptions once you have identified them? In the absence of more scientific criteria, you may determine validity by how well the author's assumptions stack up against your own experience, observations, reading, and values. A caution, however: The overall value of an article or book may depend only to a small degree on the validity of the author's assumptions. For instance, a sociologist may do a fine job of gathering statistical data about the incidence of crime in urban areas along the eastern seaboard. The sociologist also might be a Marxist, and you may disagree with the subsequent analysis of the data. Yet you may still find the data extremely valuable for your own work.

Readers will want to examine two assumptions at the heart of Crister's proposal to launch a campaign against overeating. The first is that lack of willpower alone causes, or primarily causes, obesity. While Crister does not directly assert this cause-and-effect relationship, he implies it by failing to mention other possible causes of obesity. If, for instance, genes or hormones are involved in the weight gain of some people, then it seems cruel to argue that their lack of willpower is somehow responsible—that if only they "tried harder" they could shed those unwanted pounds. Readers may also want to examine another of Crister's assumptions, that a moralizing tone is appropriate to a discussion of public health. Readers might take a different view, based on a very different assumption: that in combating problems in public health, we must deal with behaviors, not with attitudes and values associated with behaviors. Thus, in campaigns to reduce HIV infections, we would not speak of "sin" (as "gluttony" is a sin) but would instead focus strictly on reducing behaviors that spread infection. Readers are entitled to meet each of an author's assumptions with assumptions of their own; to evaluate the validity of those assumptions; and to begin formulating a critique, based on their agreement or disagreement.

## CRITIQUE

In Chapter 1 we focused on summary—the condensed presentation of ideas from another source. Summary is key to much of academic writing because it relies so heavily on the works of others for support of claims. It's not going too far to say that summarizing is the critical thinking skill from which a majority of academic writing builds. However, most academic thinking and writing do not stop at summary; usually we use summary to restate our understanding of things we see or read. Then we put that summary to use. In academic writing, one typical use of summary is as a prelude to *critique*—a *formalized, critical reading of a passage*. It also is a personal response, but writing a critique is considerably more rigorous than saying that a movie is “great,” or a book is “fascinating,” or “I didn't like it.” These are all responses, and, as such, they're a valid, even essential, part of your understanding of what you see and read. But such responses don't illuminate the subject for anyone—even you—if you haven't explained how you arrived at your conclusions.

Your task in writing a critique is to turn your critical reading of a passage into a systematic evaluation in order to deepen your reader's (and your own) understanding of that passage. Among other things, you're interested in determining what an author says, how well the points are made, what assumptions underlie the argument, what issues are overlooked, and what implications can be drawn from such an analysis. Critiques, positive or negative, should include a fair and accurate summary of the passage; they should also include a statement of your own assumptions. It is important to remember that you bring to bear an entire set of assumptions about the world. Stated or not, these assumptions underlie every evaluative comment you make; you therefore have an obligation, both to the reader and to yourself, to clarify your standards by making your assumptions explicit. Not only do your readers stand to gain by your forthrightness, but you do as well: In the process of writing a critical assessment, you are forced to examine your own knowledge, beliefs, and assumptions. Ultimately, the critique is a way of learning about yourself—yet another example of the ways in which writing is useful as a tool for critical thinking.

### How to Write Critiques

You may find it useful to organize your critiques in five sections: (1) introduction, (2) summary, (3) assessment of the presentation (on its own terms), (4) your response to the presentation, and (5) conclusion.

The box opposite offers some guidelines for writing critiques. Note that they are guidelines, not a rigid formula. Thousands of authors write critiques that do not follow the structure outlined here. Until you are more confident and practiced in writing critiques, however, we suggest you follow these guidelines. They are meant not to restrict you, but rather to provide a workable sequence for writing critiques.

### GUIDELINES FOR WRITING CRITIQUES

- **Introduce.** Introduce both the passage under analysis and the author. State the author's main argument and the point(s) you intend to make about it.

Provide background material to help your readers understand the relevance or appeal of the passage. This background material might include one or more of the following: an explanation of why the subject is of current interest; a reference to a possible controversy surrounding the subject of the passage or the passage itself; biographical information about the author; an account of the circumstances under which the passage was written; or a reference to the intended audience of the passage.

- **Summarize.** Summarize the author's main points, making sure to state the author's purpose for writing.
- **Assess the presentation.** Evaluate the validity of the author's presentation, as distinct from your points of agreement or disagreement. Comment on the author's success in achieving his or her purpose by reviewing three or four specific points. You might base your review on one (or more) of the following criteria:

Is the information accurate?

Is the information significant?

Has the author defined terms clearly?

Has the author used and interpreted information fairly?

Has the author argued logically?

- **Respond to the presentation.** Now it is your turn to respond to the author's views. With which views do you agree? With which do you disagree? Discuss your reasons for agreement and disagreement, when possible, tying these reasons to assumptions—both the author's and your own.
- **Conclude.** State your conclusions about the overall validity of the piece—your assessment of the author's success at achieving his or her aims and your reactions to the author's views. Remind the reader of the weaknesses and strengths of the passage.

## DEMONSTRATION: CRITIQUE

The critique that follows is based on Greg Crister's "Too Much of a Good Thing," which appeared in the *Los Angeles Times* as an op-ed piece on July 22, 2001 (see pages 484–87) and which we have to some extent already begun to examine. In this formal critique, you will see that it is possible to agree with an author's main point or proposal, at least provisionally, but disagree with

his or her method of demonstration, or argument. Critiquing a different selection, you could just as easily accept the author's facts and figures but reject the conclusion he or she draws from them. As long as you carefully articulate the author's assumptions and your own, explaining in some detail your agreement and disagreement, the critique is yours to take in whatever direction you see fit.

Let's summarize the preceding sections by returning to the core questions that guide critical reading. You will see how, when applied to Crister's argument, they help to set up a critique.

### What Is the Author's Purpose in Writing?

As is the case with most editorials, Greg Crister's "Too Much of a Good Thing" is an argument. He wants readers to accept his proposal for resolving the obesity epidemic among children. Parents, Crister argues, should supervise what and how much their kids eat. Those who learn lessons of dietary restraint early on can avoid weight problems later in life.

### Does the Author Succeed in This Purpose?

Crister takes a behavioral approach to the problem of obesity. To the extent that obesity is caused by undisciplined eating habits, his proposal is logical and convincing. But other studies show that not all causes of obesity are rooted in poor eating habits. Genetic makeup and hormone imbalances may also be at work. Crister makes no mention of these, and his analysis and proposed solution therefore seem limited. In addition, he adopts an antifat, judgmental tone in the essay that will likely offend people who are trying to lose weight. In sum, Crister is only partially successful in his argument.

### To What Extent Do You Agree or Disagree with the Author?

Because Crister's analysis and proposed solution are based on the assumption that obesity has a single cause (poor eating habits), he opens himself to the objection that he has oversimplified the problem. Still, common sense suggests that overweight and obese people do contribute to their conditions by making unhealthy dietary choices. So Crister's suggestion that we teach children to eat moderately before they become obese is worth supporting—provided care is taken to acknowledge the nonbehavioral causes of obesity. Crister's moralistic tone gets in the way of an otherwise reasonable (if limited) argument. Of course, we might object to his tone but continue to find merit in his proposal.

The selections you will be likely to critique are those, like Crister's, that argue a specific position. Indeed, every argument you read is an invitation to agreement or disagreement. It remains only for you to speak up and justify your position.



*Model Critique\**

**A Critique of Greg Crister's  
"Too Much of a Good Thing"**

- 1 Citing statistics on the alarming increase in the rates of childhood obesity, especially in the industrialized West, Greg Crister (L.A. Times Op-Ed, 22 July 2001) argues that parents can help avert obesity in their own homes by more closely supervising the diets of their children, serving reasonably sized portions, and limiting snacks. Crister, who has extensively researched obesity in his book Fat Land: How Americans Became the Fattest People in the World (Houghton Mifflin 2003), argues that through education we can create a leaner cultural norm, much as the French did earlier in the century when faced with a similar problem.
- 2 The stakes for maintaining a healthy body weight couldn't be higher. Fully one-quarter of American children through the age of eighteen "are overweight or obese"—an "epidemic," according to the United States Surgeon General (485). Not only are obese individuals at increased risk for a wide range of medical problems, but the nation as a whole will absorb enormous costs for their obesity, "eventually mak[ing] the battle against HIV/AIDS seem inexpensive" (485). Clearly we have good reason to fight the rise of obesity, and Crister's suggestion that individual families become a battleground for that fight makes perfect sense, as long as we realize that there will be other battlegrounds (for example, the hospital, the pharmacy, and the genetics lab). We should also take care that in "stigmatizing the unhealthful behaviors that cause obesity" (485) we do not turn a public health campaign into a moral crusade.
- 3 It takes no advanced degree in nutrition to accept the claim that children (indeed, all of us) should learn to eat in moderation. Apparently, before the age of five the lesson isn't even needed. Younger children, entirely on their own, will limit how much food they eat at a meal regardless of the amounts served. By five, however, they will eat whatever is put before them. In a culture of the

\* References to Crister are to his article as reprinted in *Writing and Reading Across the Curriculum*.

"supersized," high-fat, sugar-loaded, fast-food meal, such lack of restraint can lead to obesity. If we can teach children before their fifth birthday what counts as a reasonable portion, they might learn—for life—to eat in moderation. Crister cites other research to show that simple and yet profound dietary lessons, learned early, can make all the difference in averting a life spent battling the scale. He wisely gives parents an important role in teaching these lessons because parents, after all, teach all sorts of lessons. However, with statistics showing that roughly half of the adult population in this country is overweight or obese, Crister may want to urge parents to learn lessons about moderation themselves before attempting to become teachers for their children.

4 Crister's plan for combating the rise of childhood obesity through education is certainly reasonable, as far as it goes. But he focuses almost exclusively on behavioral factors when scientists have discovered that obesity has other, nonbehavioral causes (Gibbs). In labs across the world, researchers are identifying genes and hormones that influence weight gain. No one fully understands all the mechanisms by which overweight people, who may eat as little as their skinnier counterparts, gain or shed pounds. But it is clear that being fat is not simply about lacking willpower—that is, about "unhealthy behaviors" (485)—around food. Thus, we should not expect Crister's approach of teaching dietary moderation to work in every case. For many people, solutions to weight gain will be found both in new dietary behaviors and in medicines that come from labs where researchers study how the body burns and stores fat. To the extent that obesity is the result of a child's inability to say "no" to a supersized meal, we should teach restraint just as Crister advises. But his behavioral fix will not work for everyone, and parents should be instructed on what to do when teaching restraint alone fails to keep their children reasonably trim.

5 A more serious problem with Crister's argument is his use (twice) of the word "gluttony" and the judgmental attitude it implies. Early in the essay Crister argues that American parents need "to promulgate . . . dietary restraint, something our ancestors

knew simply as avoiding gluttony" (485). Gluttony was one of the seven deadly sins (along with pride, greed, envy, anger, lust, and sloth), which Christian theologians have been denouncing for nearly 1,500 years (University) to little effect. While Crister insists that "no one should be stigmatized for being overweight," he advocates "stigmatizing the unhealthy behaviors that cause obesity" (485), assuming that people distinguish between the sin and the sinner. In practice, people rarely do. Crister does little to distance himself from anti-fat bias after introducing the bias-heavy term "gluttony" into the essay—which is a mistake: The overweight and obese have a hard enough time losing weight. They should not have to suffer the judgments of those who suggest "that thinness signals self-discipline and self-respect, whereas fatness signals self-contempt and lack of resolve" (Worley).

6 Given a proposal that is otherwise so sensible, Crister doesn't need to complicate matters by inviting moral judgments. He is at his most convincing when he makes a straightforward recommendation to change the behavior of children based on sound scientific research. Effective dietary strategies can be taught, and parents are the best teachers in this case as long as they realize that teaching restraint will be only one of several approaches and that judgments equating thinness with virtue should have no place in our efforts. We face a difficult challenge in meeting the growing problem of childhood obesity, and for the most part Greg Crister suggests a reasonable and workable place to begin.

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