Critiquing: a guide

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Introduction

Critiquing:

- Can be done by an individual or in a group. Working in a group can be very motivating, as group members are able to discuss various aspects of the paper and put forward why they think it is valuable or not valuable. Also discussions about the paper’s potential contribution to practice can be developed within a group.

- Should not be thought of as a means of deciding what is wrong with the paper – it is not an invitation to attack the author and the paper. Instead it is a means by which the strengths and weaknesses of the paper are identified and drawn out. Once this is done you can confidently consider how the paper may assist you in the development of your own work either in practice or in your own academic advancement.

- Is time consuming, and for many of us is achieved in a number of stages. Often involving putting the paper down and returning to it after thinking about its contents for a couple of days. You will be expected to read the paper a number of times as well as make notes about its various parts. However, as with all other skills, practice does speed the process up over a period of time.

Choose the article

When making your choice, think about why you want to read the article. Many of us choose papers that we fundamentally agree with.

Therefore it can be a useful exercise to critique a paper that is outside your area of expertise and interest. This approach should help you develop a more objective approach to evaluating published work.

One of the first stages when evaluating a paper is to decide what kind of paper it is. Papers can be categorized as follows:

- original research
- literature review
- case study
- personal view
- report
- discussion paper.

One way of determining what kind of paper you are dealing with is to read the abstract at the beginning, or the conclusion at the end. I know of a number of people, including myself, who collect photocopies of the first and last pages of articles so that they can be read thoroughly and the type of paper determined correctly. If it is considered that the whole paper needs to be read then I return to obtain a copy of the rest of the pages of the article. This saves time and money in photocopying articles that are then not used/critiqued. One additional hint – if you are photocopying the front and back sheet make sure you have the full reference of the article and details of whence you obtained it (library, floor, section) so that you can return and retrieve the rest of the article easily. It is surprising just how deceptive memories become in libraries, particularly if you use more than one library.
Read the article

You need to become familiar with what the paper is about. In addition you need to establish:

- who wrote it
- why they wrote it
- what they did
- why, when, where and how they did it
- what was found
- was it morally sound?

Divide the article into sections

Research articles are usually divided into sections as detailed below:

- abstract
- introduction
- method
- sampling approach
- ethical discussion
- analytical approach
- presentation of data
- discussion
- recommendations.

Having the article divided up into sections, by the author, provides you with manageable parts to consider in depth. You need to be able to understand each section. If you do not understand then try to determine why, is it because you lack research knowledge and skills? Or critical reading skills? Or because the author has omitted something or not fully explored the issue? Do not immediately assume it is a failure on your part. Those of you who are involved in writing articles or assignments know how easy it is to make assumptions and not clarify your ideas fully on paper. If there are things you do not understand then you may need to go away and find out. For example, if the author has used grounded theory and you are unclear about this you will have to do some further investigating before you can make any informed judgements about the paper.

Consider each section in detail

1. Consider the strengths and weaknesses of each section.
2. Make notes on your impressions of each section.

When considering each section be aware of your own personal feelings about research. For example, you may not like questionnaires, believe that interviewing is a waste of time or may favour qualitative research. You need to be aware of your personal biases and the various ways they may influence your evaluation. Do not fall into the trap of feeling angry or irritated with the paper/author because they have used a technique that you believe lacks credibility. Make sure that your judgements are based on an objective review of strengths and weaknesses rather than personal opinion and bias.

Consider each section in relation to the whole study

Now you need to decide how each section contributes to the paper as a whole. Are there sections that seem out of place? Are some sections particularly strong or weak? Does the author pay more attention to some sections than others, e.g. more attention to the data collection method than to ethical considerations?

Consider the value, significance, strengths and weaknesses of the whole study

You can now consider the value of the whole study and its potential application to your practice.

The following should act as a guide to your critique

Overall the title of the article should represent the contents of the paper. The article should be clearly written and well organized. The author of the paper should be qualified to write about the study. The abstract should provide an overall picture of the paper and include: the research question and/or hypotheses, sample size, research design and method and an overview of the findings.

1. The research problem and aims of the study should be outlined.
2. Definitions of terms should be provided.
3. The literature review should provide a summary of what is currently known about
the subject. There should be evidence of an organized, critical review of a wide range of relevant literature, made up of primary sources, associated with the subject.

4. The research method/s should be explained. The method should be linked to the research question and aims. Hypotheses should be testable.

5. There should be some discussion of the potential strengths and weaknesses of the chosen method.

6. The sample should be appropriate to the type of question, aims and method.

7. Methods for analysing data should be discussed.

8. Data should be clearly presented and be related to the research question and aims.

9. Ethical issues such as confidentiality, anonymity, consent and the protection of information should be discussed. Also, the ways in which subjects are recruited to the study and any access issues experienced. If patients are involved, then the support of the Local Research Ethics Committee should be evident.

10. There should be some discussion of the findings with recommendations. The overall strengths and weaknesses of the study should be explored.

Further Reading
Abbott P 1993 Why do we need to review literature? Nurse Researcher 1; 1: 14–22