



HELLENIC REPUBLIC  
UNIVERSITY OF CRETE

# Academic English

## Section 12: Writing a critical review

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REVIEW OF AN ARTICLE  
SUMMARY AND CRITICAL  
E V A L U A T I O N  
Read critically  
KEEP UP TO DATE  
ADJUST TO CHANGE

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# Steps in summarizing

Quick overview -read all sections

Read without taking notes

Read again and highlight important ideas

- main aim
- opposing views
- methodological approach
- textual analysis
- main findings/conclusions

Use your notes ONLY

Paraphrase

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# Steps in evaluating

STRENGTHS & WEAKNESSES

SPECIFIC CRITERIA

Understand not just content

UNDERSTAND TEXT'S

P U R P O S E

INTENDED AUDIENCE

MAIN COMPONENTS

INTERRELATION

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# Specific criteria(1)

A U T H O R ' S   A I M  
ACHIEVED -TO WHAT EXTENT  
ADDS TO THE BODY OF  
K N O W L E D G E  
RELATIONSHIP IT BEARS TO  
OTHER WORKS IN THE FIELD  
WHAT IS MISSING?  
IS THIS A PROBLEM?

## Specific Criteria (2)

RESEARCH APPROACH

OBJECTIVE OR BIASED

VALID RELIABLE RESULTS

Analytical framework

Clear hypothesis

Argument consistent

Valid reliable and effective

EVIDENCE

CONCLUSIONS JUSTIFIED

TEXTUAL IMITATIONS

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

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.

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.

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.

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.

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)

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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).

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.

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.

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

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.

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.

## **1. Introduction**

*Begin with full bibliographical information of the text reviewed*

*Introduce the broad issue*

## **2. Summary**

*Introduce text authors and their main argument*

*Focus on the most important points*

*Summarize the supporting evidence*

*Round off the key points and  
State the implications*

## **3. Evaluation/Critique**

*Signal the shift to evaluation*

*Negative comments:*

Limited evidence (small sample)

Cultural bias

Oversimplification

*Positive comments:*

Balance your commentary

## **4. Conclusion**



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# References

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  - Writing a Critical Review. Educational Development Unit, Australian School of Business. (2015) from: <http://wwdocs.fce.unsw.edu.au/fce/EDU/eduwritingcritreview.pdf>
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  - What makes a good critical review? Language and Learning Services, Monash University (2013) from: <http://artsonline.monash.edu.au/aallu/files/2013/03/resources-good-crit-review.pdf>
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# End of Section



Ευρωπαϊκή Ένωση  
Ευρωπαϊκό Κοινωνικό Ταμείο



Με τη συγχρηματοδότηση της Ελλάδας και της Ευρωπαϊκής Ένωσης



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<https://opencourses.uoc.gr/courses/course/view.php?id=349>.

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