

# Summarizing & Reviewing

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Center for Convivial  
Research & Autonomy

As a small collective dedicated to collective pedagogies, the CCRA currently claims a number of interconnected projects that weave together innovative, community-centered research, learning, and local capacity-building. The CCRA's investment in co-learning spaces generates critical analytical skills, research tools, facilitation techniques, and community service strategies able to address the intersections of environmental regeneration, community well-being, community safety, food sovereignty, and community health. For more info: [ccra@mitotedigital.org](mailto:ccra@mitotedigital.org)

## Purpose of Reviews

There are a number of strategies or approaches for engaging secondary texts that researchers may use as they identify, accumulate, evaluate, and interpret sources for their research. As a rule, scholars are expected to summarize the work of other researchers in the field, review select texts to evaluate new research, and assess an entire body of literature to engage critical debates in a field. Thus, active scholars are constantly summarizing, reviewing, and evaluating relevant secondary sources. Summaries, reviews and assessments of a text, or a designated body of literature can be a useful way to advance the research and writing process while developing the skills necessary for serious inquiry. Well crafted reviews invite one to write at all stages of the research process. In what follows we suggest a straightforward approach to representing and evaluating seminal secondary sources related to a topic.

Researchers are often too casual about how they approach secondary sources. In many instances they simply consume a great many texts, neglecting to put them under the scrutiny that they apply to primary sources. First and foremost, prominent secondary sources provide access to the scholarly debates that set the parameters of a topic or field. In addition, secondary sources make available primary evidence used to advance a particular claim. This might include, for example, archival documents, ethnographic observation, or oral testimony. As models of well-constructed arguments on a topic, secondary sources can also provoke new thinking, providing new research problems or questions. Consequently, a well thought out review of an important secondary text can encourage interventions in regards a topic.

Any review of a secondary text has the burden of generously representing the intervention and its significance. A review situates the text and evaluates it in relation to the

## Select Resources:

Wayne Booth, et. al., *The Craft of Research* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003);

Wendy Belcher, "Writing the Academic Book Review," <[http://www.chicano.ucla.edu/press/siteart/jli\\_bookreviewguidelines.pdf](http://www.chicano.ucla.edu/press/siteart/jli_bookreviewguidelines.pdf)>;

Chris Hart, *Doing A Literature Review: Releasing the Social Science Research Imagination* (London: Sage Publications, 2003);

Stuart Hall, "Cultural Studies: Two Paradigms," in Richard Collins, et. al., *Media, Culture, & Society: A Critical Reader* (London: Sage Publications, 1986): 33-48;

The University of Wisconsin-Madison Writing Center, *Writer's Handbook: Critical Reviews*, <<http://www.wisc.edu/writing/Handbook/CriNonfiction.html>>

critical debates related to a topic. A successful review should highlight and evaluate the concepts introduced in the text. It also useful to identify key quotations that might assist in summarizing the text. It is important to distinguish what you are quoting from the text you are paraphrasing or summarizing from your own thinking about the topic.

Reviews depend on well-crafted summaries the present “the sum and substance” of the text under consideration. A successful summary does not re-narrate or describe the text but provides a short, succinct statement that evaluates the success of the intervention the text makes.

### The Book Review

More thorough reviews of a selected monograph are opportunities to “think” and “work” like an engaged scholar. Scholarly reviews are short. Reviews are typically six to seven hundred and fifty words. On a occasion journals request longer reviews at two thousand words. In some instances, scholars write much longer essays that examine a combination of related texts often treating a specific topic.

A thoughtful review summarizes the author’s argument, assesses his or her success in presenting it, and evaluates the significance of the intervention in relation to specific debates in a given field. In addition to evaluating the author’s claim, the review examines the author’s organization, use of evidence, and conclusions. Thus, a well-crafted review situates the author’s intervention in regards major debates in a specific field, e.g. Ethnic Studies.

Most importantly, critical review does not re-narrate a book. A careful review evaluates the book that has been selected and not the one you would have preferred had been written! Does the text under review deliver what it promised at the outset? The appraisal should be

supported by details found in the book, accurately quoting from the text when appropriate and only when necessary to support the critique. Be specific, making sure to avoid generalizations and incorporate especially relevant passages that support the critique. Reviews of this sort typically do not use footnotes or endnotes. Simply list the page number(s) in parenthesis immediately following the quotation.

Remember, a successful review also makes a claim about how the book should be read. Therefore, a review is by nature a political document. “Critics” often use a review to intervene in public debates. Critically assessing a text allows a reviewer to enter into public discourse, revealing often overlooked issues or engaging relevant themes present in the text under review. These may or may not be acknowledged by the author. In some instances they may have been taken for granted and therefore less likely to be available or apparent to less careful “readers.” Thus, a review not only suggests multiple ways a text might be read; it can also point to how the text might be strategically used when read a certain way and in a particular context.

The first paragraph should summarize the author’s argument. Identify the book and author as quickly as possible in the first or second sentence of the first paragraph. The second paragraph provides a brief summary of the book as a whole suggesting an evaluation of the scope of the argument. It is often useful to rehearse the main points of the author’s argument by noting the claims of each section or chapter. The third and fourth paragraphs offer an analysis of the text by evaluating its strengths and weaknesses. A critical analysis might focus on one key issue or address a number of concerns. The last paragraph can provide a final or overall assessment of the book, reiterating the noted issues that

### Five general guidelines for successful reviews:

1. Name the author and title of the text under review early in the essay making sure to summarize the argument or intervention the author makes.
2. Assess the author’s success in presenting the argument –is it compelling, if so, why?
3. Use active verbs in order to construct concise economical sentences –avoid any unnecessary phrases or clichés.
4. Engage the essay with as much generosity as possible, always highlighting strengths as well as weaknesses.
5. Evaluate key concepts or ideas and connect them to the argument.

A review should begin by listing the text. The format for a book review should begin with a complete citation of the text under examination using the Chicago format. The Chicago style as found in the *Chicago Manual of Style*, is the bible for those who work in the publishing industry and lends itself to a more complex approach to attribution or explanation. (NB: There are a number of accepted approaches to reference the work of others, including APA, MLA and Chicago.) An abbreviated reference to the Chicago format can be found at <http://www.lib.berkeley.edu/instruct/guides/chicago-turabianstyle.pdf>. Thus, a complete citation should include the full bibliographic information: author, title, publication information (location of publication, publisher, date), and the elements of the book (number of pages, maps, illustrations, notes, bibliography, and index).

sample: Mumia Abu-Jamal. *We Want Freedom: A Life in the Black Panther Party*. (Boston: Southend Press, 2004).

## The Literature Review

The purpose of a literature review is for a researcher to demonstrate the breadth of his or her knowledge of a selected topic. A literature review can be a paragraph, section in an essay, or no more than a summary of one or two sentences. It can also be a separate extended document. In each instance, it should provide an analysis of the history of the topic, highlighting different approaches and key questions in relation to it. In many instances the literature review helps to explore issues that have been left unanswered or somehow require further critique. A successful, thorough analysis of the topic's history points to the key debates that still motivate discussion about it.

A well-crafted literature review evaluates how the topic has been researched by attending to a number of tasks. A literature review situates the topic with an analysis of the key issues that inform it. In addition to an assessment of earlier critiques, a literature review provides an analysis of the critical concepts, theories, and methodologies generated in relation to the topic and the debates that animate a field. The literature review analyzes previous research approaches to reveal where some insights have been successful and others have somehow been incomplete or flawed.

The literature review should be written with a sense of purpose. As an effort to further understand the theoretical or methodological tradition of the field, a literature review intervenes in the debates associated with the topic. Therefore a successful literature review provides an analysis of a sufficient amount of scholarship on the topic not only to justify further research but also to intervene in the debate. On a practical level, the literature review is an opportunity to narrow down the topic to establish a foundation to help explain the intervention underway. Thus, the

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Uni-Tierra Califas



Universidad de la Tierra Califas (UT Califas), one of the CCRA's primary projects, facilitates a number of interconnected spaces of co-learning that invite de-professionalized intellectuals, community-based scholars, and convivial learners to co-generate diverse knowledges and movement building resources from within the community. The UT Califas "campus" extends Universidad de la Tierra Oaxaca and Universidad de la Tierra Chiapas" in Mexico to make possible strategic exchanges of local folks whose community involvement and intellectual itineraries would benefit from travel and research between the Bay Area and other increasingly relevant global sites. Locally, UT Califas' commitment to collective pedagogies regenerates community, facilitates intercultural and intergenerational dialogues, and reclaims local commons through an "architecture" that includes a Center for Appropriat(ed) Technologies, Language and Literacy Institute, Theses Clinic, Study Travel Jornadas, and a Democracy Ateneo. Taken together, these projects/spaces facilitate the sharing of a wide variety of strategic, community-oriented technologies, or convivial tools, in the areas of community service, grassroots research, and conjunctural analysis.

### LEARNING SPACES:

Democracy Ateneo  
2nd Saturday of the month  
@ Casa Vicky (17th St. & Julian St.)

Social Factory Ateneo  
4th Saturday of the month  
@ Obelisco (3411 E 12th St. Ste. 110)

Tertulia  
1st and 3rd Friday of the month  
@ Grande's Pizza (4th St. & San Carlos)  
for more info: [uni-tierra@mitotedigital.org](mailto:uni-tierra@mitotedigital.org)

Convivial Research &  
Insurgent Learning *taller*  
[cril.mitotedigital.org](http://cril.mitotedigital.org)

A web infrastructure designed to facilitate locally rooted participatory, action-oriented investigations generated in reflection and action spaces that regenerate community.