



Literature review: Differences between disciplines

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Introduction

In general, critique does not vary much between disciplines, and the underlying logic and types of critique are surprisingly stable. However, critique can take on different priorities and styles; what counts as “good critique” and how visible it should be can vary greatly. What changes is where you push hardest and how explicitly critical you are.

Humanities

In humanities disciplines such as history, literature, philosophy, and cultural studies, critique is primarily oriented toward interpretation, conceptual analysis, sustained argumentation, coherence, depth, and inclusiveness of interpretation. The tone is explicitly critical rather than merely descriptive, and it foregrounds evaluation of how scholars construct meaning, justify claims, and position their work within broader intellectual debates. Rather than summarizing existing studies, critique interrogates the assumptions and interpretive choices that shape scholarly conclusions.

A central concern of critique in the humanities is conceptual clarity. This involves examining how key terms are defined, whether those definitions remain consistent throughout an argument, and whether they are adequate for the phenomena under discussion. Closely related is attention to interpretive logic, including the internal consistency of arguments and the plausibility of the inferential steps that connect evidence to claims. Critique also addresses errors of judgment that arise when conclusions are drawn from limited, selective, or biased sources. In such cases, the issue is not only empirical insufficiency but also the inferential leap from evidence to interpretation. Critique also examines the extent to which a work engages alternative readings, asking whether counterarguments and competing interpretations are acknowledged and addressed rather than ignored.

In addition, critique evaluates the interpretive frameworks that guide analysis, including theoretical models, methodological preferences, and disciplinary conventions. Attention is given to ideological, political, or historiographical assumptions that may be implicit rather than explicitly acknowledged. Finally, critique considers what is absent from an account, including silenced voices, excluded perspectives, and unexamined contexts, and assesses how these omissions constrain the scope and explanatory power of the work. This involves identifying silences and exclusions within scholarly accounts, giving attention to voices, traditions, social groups, or historical periods that are marginalized or omitted, as well as consideration of how such absences shape the overall narrative. By examining what is left unexamined, critique assesses the limits of a study’s explanatory reach and its implications for understanding the past or interpreting cultural phenomena.

A typical critical move in humanities scholarship involves demonstrating how a particular interpretive emphasis inadvertently narrows understanding and reduces the field of vision. For example, privileging one explanatory dimension may marginalize others that are equally necessary for a comprehensive account.

Examples

This study relies heavily on authorial intent as the primary determinant of meaning, treating the text as a closed system governed by the writer's original purpose. By neglecting the role of readership and historical reception, the analysis forecloses alternative interpretations that emerge through social and cultural circulation, thereby limiting its capacity to explain the text's enduring significance.

The argument assumes a coherent and unified national ideology throughout the period under examination, despite substantial evidence of regional and class-based divergence. This homogenizing framework obscures internal tensions and dissenting perspectives, resulting in conclusions that overstate consensus and underrepresent conflict within the historical record.

By concentrating almost exclusively on elite philosophical texts, the study presents an account of the tradition that emphasizes doctrinal refinement over social practice. This emphasis marginalizes popular and vernacular forms of engagement that played a significant role in shaping the tradition's reception, thereby limiting the scope of the analysis.

The argument advances a coherent interpretation of cultural change based on literary sources, yet it gives little attention to material or visual culture. This selective evidentiary base excludes alternative modes of meaning-making, raising questions about whether the proposed interpretation fully captures the complexity of the historical context.

Social sciences

In the social sciences, including psychology, sociology, economics, and political science, critique is structured around the alignment between theory and method and the quality of the evidence used to support empirical claims. Scholarly evaluation in these fields seeks to balance theoretical coherence with methodological rigor, and it is typically expressed in a measured and cautiously evaluative tone. Rather than adopting an overtly adversarial stance, critique often aims to refine existing explanations and clarify the conditions under which particular findings hold.

A central focus of critique in the social sciences is the adequacy of theoretical framing and the assumptions that underpin it. This involves assessing whether theoretical models are sufficiently specified, whether their assumptions are plausible, and whether they are appro-

priately matched to the research questions being asked. Methodological rigor is examined alongside theory, with attention to research design, data sources, sampling strategies, and analytic techniques. Particular emphasis is placed on the quality of evidence and the extent to which conclusions are warranted by the data.

Critique also addresses issues of external validity and context, evaluating whether findings derived from specific populations, settings, or time periods can be generalized beyond the original study. Conflicting empirical findings receive sustained attention, as discrepancies across studies may indicate contextual effects, measurement differences, or limitations in prevailing theoretical accounts. Rather than dismissing such inconsistencies, critique uses them as a basis for qualification, synthesis, or theoretical extension.

A typical critical move in social science scholarship involves acknowledging the explanatory strengths of a model at one level of analysis while identifying its limitations at another. For example, an account may successfully describe aggregate patterns yet leave important sources of individual-level variation unexplained.

Examples

The proposed model provides a compelling explanation for macro-level trends in voter turnout over time. However, recent survey-based studies reveal substantial heterogeneity in individual participation that the model does not address, calling into question its adequacy for explaining behavior at the micro level.

While the theory predicts consistent effects across institutional contexts, empirical findings vary significantly between urban and rural settings. These discrepancies suggest that contextual factors moderate the relationship under study, indicating that the theory requires further specification to account for cross-contextual variation.

Applied and professional fields

In applied and professional disciplines such as education, Christian ministry, nursing, business, law, and public policy, critique is oriented toward practical usefulness, transferability across settings, and feasibility of implementation. Scholarly evaluation in these fields is explicitly concerned with how research findings can inform practice, decision-making, and institutional design. Accordingly, the tone of critique is pragmatic and evaluative, emphasizing applied consequences rather than purely theoretical considerations.

Critique in applied fields commonly examines the relevance of research to real-world practice, assessing whether proposed models, interventions, or frameworks address the conditions under which professionals operate. Attention is given to feasibility and scalability, including the availability of resources, required expertise, and organizational capacity necessary for implementation. Studies are also evaluated in terms of their policy and ethical impli-

cations, particularly where research findings may influence regulation, professional standards, or the distribution of risks and benefits among stakeholders.

A further focus of critique involves identifying gaps between research designs and the constraints of real-world contexts. This includes situations in which interventions are tested under idealized conditions that do not reflect institutional limitations, competing priorities, or structural inequities. Such critique does not necessarily dispute the internal validity of a study but questions the extent to which its conclusions can be translated into sustainable practice.

A typical critical move in applied and professional scholarship acknowledges the conceptual or empirical strength of a model while highlighting barriers to its adoption. For example, an intervention may be well supported by theory and evidence yet depend on levels of funding, staffing, or infrastructure that are rarely attainable in everyday settings.

Examples

The intervention framework is grounded in a well-established theoretical model and demonstrates strong outcomes in pilot studies. However, its successful implementation depends on extensive staff training and long-term financial investment, raising concerns about its viability in under-resourced educational institutions.

Although the policy proposal aligns with best-practice recommendations, it assumes a degree of administrative coordination that is uncommon in decentralized health systems. This mismatch between research design and institutional capacity limits the transferability of the findings, particularly in large public-sector organizations.

Theology and religious studies

In theology and religious studies, critique is directed primarily toward the presuppositions, interpretive strategies, and source practices that shape scholarly argumentation. Rather than evaluating research solely on technical or empirical grounds, critique in these fields examines how theological commitments, doctrinal positions, and interpretive traditions inform the construction of knowledge. As a result, critical engagement is both analytical and reflective, aiming to clarify underlying assumptions rather than to invalidate them outright.

A central focus of critique concerns theological presuppositions and doctrinal commitments. This involves assessing how explicitly such commitments are articulated and how consistently they are maintained throughout an argument. Closely related is the evaluation of hermeneutical frameworks, including the interpretive principles and methods used to read sacred texts, traditions, and historical sources. Critique also addresses questions of canon

formation and source selection, asking which texts or traditions are treated as authoritative, which are marginalized, and how these choices shape theological conclusions.

Another important dimension of critique in theology and religious studies involves the relationship between confessional and critical stances. Scholarly work may operate within a particular faith tradition or confessional framework, or it may adopt a more distanced, critical approach. Critique does not necessarily privilege one stance over the other but evaluates whether the chosen posture is appropriate to the research aims and whether its implications are adequately acknowledged.

A typical critical move in theological scholarship involves questioning claims of coherence or systematic unity across diverse sources. For example, an argument may presuppose a level of doctrinal or conceptual consistency that is not supported by the historical, textual, or interpretive evidence.

Importantly, critique in theology often functions to make assumptions visible rather than to dismiss them. By bringing theological commitments, interpretive choices, and confessional orientations into view, critique enables more transparent and constructive scholarly dialogue.

Examples

The analysis presumes a high degree of systematic coherence across the scriptural and patristic sources under consideration. However, significant theological tensions and historical discontinuities within these texts complicate the claim of unity, suggesting the need for a more differentiated account of doctrinal development.

While the study adopts an explicitly confessional reading of the canon, the implications of this stance for historical interpretation are not fully addressed. Making these doctrinal commitments more explicit would clarify the limits and possibilities of the proposed argument, strengthening its contribution to ongoing theological debate.

Sciences & engineering

In the sciences and engineering, critique is oriented primarily toward methodological rigor, empirical adequacy, and reproducibility. The emphasis is placed on how knowledge is generated through experimental procedures, data collection, and analytical techniques, rather than on interpretive or conceptual debate. As a result, the tone of critique is typically restrained, technical, and indirect, prioritizing precision and objectivity over explicit evaluative judgment.

Critique in these fields commonly focuses on the soundness of experimental design, including the appropriateness of controls and the extent to which confounding variables are addressed. Careful attention is given to measurement accuracy, sources of error, and the reli-

ability of instruments or computational models. Statistical considerations play a central role, particularly with respect to sample size, statistical power, and the replicability of reported findings. Rather than challenging overarching frameworks, critique often identifies incremental gaps in existing research, such as conditions under which a phenomenon has not yet been tested or parameters that remain insufficiently explored.

By contrast, there is generally less emphasis on theoretical debate, except in fields where theory itself constitutes the primary object of inquiry, such as theoretical physics or mathematics. Similarly, critique tends to avoid overtly evaluative or polemical language, instead allowing limitations to emerge through careful qualification, comparison, or methodological refinement.

A typical critical move in scientific and engineering literature involves questioning the generality of assumptions embedded in prior studies. For example, an analysis may demonstrate that a simplifying assumption holds only within a restricted range of conditions, thereby motivating further investigation without directly discrediting earlier work.

Examples

Previous studies model the system response as linear across the full temperature range considered. However, experimental data obtained at elevated temperatures indicate significant deviations from linearity, suggesting that the underlying assumptions of these models are not valid under high-temperature conditions.

While earlier experiments report consistent results under controlled laboratory settings, the effects of environmental variability have not been systematically examined. The absence of testing under fluctuating pressure conditions limits the applicability of these findings to real-world systems, indicating a need for additional experiments to assess robustness.

What education, theology and humanities tend to share

When education and theology intersect with other humanities-type disciplines, expectations surrounding critique become layered and occasionally tension-filled. These fields do not adhere to a single critical model; instead, they draw simultaneously on interpretive traditions from the humanities and evaluative concerns tied to practice, formation, and institutional life. Effective critique in this interdisciplinary space therefore requires a flexible approach that accommodates multiple intellectual commitments without reducing them to a uniform standard.

Across education, theology, and the humanities more broadly, literature reviews tend to privilege interpretive forms of critique over narrowly technical evaluation. Scholarly engagement is expected to be explicit yet charitable, focusing on the assessment of arguments, assumptions, and frameworks rather than on adversarial refutation. Critique is also situated,

meaning that historical, cultural, confessional, and institutional contexts are treated as integral to understanding both the production and implications of knowledge. In addition, analysis in these fields is normatively aware, acknowledging that values, purposes, and underlying commitments are not external to scholarship but actively shape research questions and conclusions. These shared expectations distinguish such work from STEM-oriented literature reviews, which typically foreground methodological precision over interpretive or normative concerns.

Within this cluster of disciplines, however, points of emphasis diverge, particularly in education research. Critique in education places strong weight on methodological fit, assessing whether research designs and analytic strategies are appropriate for the educational phenomena under investigation. Attention is also given to contextual limits, including variations across school systems, policy environments, and cultural settings. Applicability to practice constitutes another central concern, as educational research is frequently evaluated in terms of its potential to inform teaching, leadership, or policy decisions. As a result, critique often targets overgeneralization, especially when conclusions are drawn from narrow or atypical institutional contexts.

A typical critical move in education-oriented scholarship involves questioning the transferability of widely cited frameworks or findings. For instance, an approach may be influential in academic or policy discourse yet rest on empirical foundations that do not reflect the diversity of educational settings in which it is applied.

Examples

This pedagogical framework has been influential in shaping contemporary teacher-evaluation policies. However, its empirical basis is drawn largely from studies conducted in elite, well-resourced institutions, raising concerns about its relevance for schools operating under conditions of chronic funding and staffing constraints.

The theological model of formation is presented as broadly applicable across educational contexts. Yet its assumptions about institutional stability and shared confessional identity may not hold in pluralistic or secular settings, limiting its usefulness for understanding educational practice beyond its original context.

What interdisciplinarity changes

In interdisciplinary scholarship, critique functions not only as an evaluative practice but also as a method in its own right. Rather than being confined to assessing work within a single disciplinary framework, critique is used to examine how different fields structure questions, generate knowledge, and delimit what counts as evidence. As a result, critical engagement in interdisciplinary research is directed toward the relationships between disciplines as much as toward individual texts or studies.

A central task of critique in interdisciplinary contexts is to demonstrate how the assumptions of one discipline may constrain or obscure the questions posed by another. This involves making disciplinary presuppositions explicit and showing how they shape research priorities and interpretive horizons. Critique also entails translating debates across fields, clarifying how similar terms, concepts, or problems are understood differently in distinct dis-

ciplinary traditions. Such translation is necessary to prevent conceptual slippage and to enable meaningful dialogue between bodies of scholarship that do not share a common vocabulary.

Interdisciplinary critique further attends to mismatches in scale, such as differences between textual, institutional, and experiential levels of analysis. Identifying these mismatches allows the researcher to explain why certain approaches succeed or fail when applied outside their original disciplinary context. In addition, critique must justify the legitimacy of borrowing concepts or methods from other fields, demonstrating that such transfers are theoretically coherent and analytically productive rather than merely eclectic.

A classic interdisciplinary critical move involves articulating tensions between disciplinary priorities that have not been fully examined. For example, one field may privilege forms of knowledge that another treats as secondary, resulting in unresolved conceptual conflicts.

Examples

Educational research in this area prioritizes standardized indicators of effectiveness, emphasizing outcomes that can be quantitatively assessed. By contrast, theological accounts focus on formative practices that unfold over time and resist direct measurement, revealing a conceptual tension that remains insufficiently theorized in existing interdisciplinary studies.

Sociological analyses of institutional change operate primarily at the organizational level, while philosophical treatments emphasize individual moral agency. This divergence in analytical scale complicates attempts to integrate the two approaches, suggesting that further justification is needed to reconcile their underlying assumptions.

How “hard” should critique be?

In interdisciplinary spaces spanning education, theology, and the humanities, norms surrounding the intensity of critique are shaped by an expectation of intellectual rigor combined with scholarly generosity. Critique is expected to be firm in its engagement with ideas, arguments, and assumptions, while remaining measured and respectful toward the scholars whose work is under discussion. This balance is reflected in careful attention to language and in an explicit acknowledgement of the reviewer’s own standpoint and commitments.

Within these fields, strong critique is not only acceptable but encouraged, provided it is framed as a form of dialogue rather than as an effort to discredit or dismantle prior work. Critical engagement is understood as a contribution to collective inquiry, in which arguments are tested, refined, and extended through conversation. As a result, evaluative force is often conveyed through analytical precision and qualification rather than through overtly confrontational claims. In these spaces, the norm is:

- Firm on ideas
- Gentle on people
- Careful with language
- Explicit about standpoint

Linguistic choices play an important role in signaling this stance. Critique commonly relies on verbs that emphasize complexity, development, and clarification, such as those that indicate problematization, complication, reframing, or the rendering of assumptions visible. More forceful evaluative terms may be used when warranted, but they are typically employed sparingly and supported by careful argumentation to avoid overstating claims or foreclosing dialogue. Strong critique is welcomed if it is framed as dialogue, not demolition.

Safer verbs are: *problematizes, complicates, reframes, brings into question, extends, renders visible*

Riskier verbs may be used sparingly, but are not forbidden: *fails, ignores, misrepresents*

A typical critical move in this tradition involves articulating limitations in a way that invites further reflection rather than defensiveness. By situating critique within a shared intellectual project, scholars are able to advance robust arguments while maintaining a constructive tone.

Examples

This account offers a compelling synthesis of educational and theological perspectives on formation. However, certain underlying assumptions about institutional stability warrant further examination, as they complicate the applicability of the framework in more fluid or contested contexts.

The analysis brings valuable attention to normative dimensions of pedagogical practice. At the same time, it leaves unaddressed important questions about learner diversity, which, if made more explicit, could extend the framework's relevance across a wider range of educational settings.

The most valued kinds of critique in your setting

In an education–theology–humanities hybrid, the most valuable kinds of critique are:

1. Conceptual and theoretical critique (What is being assumed? How are key terms constructed?)
2. Contextual critique (Whose context? Which tradition? Which institutional setting?)
3. Hermeneutical critique (How are texts, practices, or data being interpreted?)
4. Comparative/synthetic critique (How do different traditions or disciplines talk past each other?)
5. Methodological critique (Important, but usually secondary unless methods are central)

Examiners of theses and dissertations examiners usually want to see some characteristics in critique, even though they rarely say them explicitly. They're looking for evidence that the candidate can:

1. Read generously *and* critically
2. Navigate normative commitments without collapsing into advocacy
3. Handle plural traditions without flattening differences
4. Justify why *this* conversation needs *this* study now

In education–theology–humanities contexts, examiners often assess literature reviews according to criteria that are rarely stated explicitly but nonetheless strongly shape judgments of scholarly quality. Beyond technical competence, reviewers look for evidence that the candidate can engage existing scholarship with both generosity and critical acuity. This involves recognizing the strengths and intentions of prior work while also identifying its limits, tensions, and unresolved questions.

A key expectation concerns the handling of normative commitments. Candidates are expected to acknowledge values, purposes, and ethical or theological orientations that inform their work, while avoiding a collapse into unexamined advocacy. Effective critique demonstrates the ability to analyze normativity as an object of inquiry rather than simply assuming it as a conclusion. Similarly, examiners attend closely to how candidates navigate plural traditions, whether disciplinary, confessional, cultural, or theoretical. Strong literature reviews preserve meaningful differences between traditions rather than smoothing them into artificial consensus.

Another important criterion is the candidate's ability to justify the timeliness and necessity of the study. Examiners look for a clear explanation of why a particular scholarly conversation requires further engagement at this moment and why the present study is positioned to make a distinctive contribution. In this sense, a successful literature review does more than identify an absence or “gap” in the existing research; it articulates a productive tension that motivates the research questions and signals their significance. In this context, a good literature review doesn't just lead to a “gap” — it leads to a productive tension.

A typical evaluative move from examiners involves noting whether the literature review demonstrates intellectual maturity by holding complexity without premature resolution. Reviews that foreground tensions, contradictions, or unresolved debates are often read as more sophisticated than those that move too quickly toward closure.

Examples

The literature review demonstrates careful engagement with theological and educational traditions, acknowledging internal diversity and disagreement. By resisting the urge to resolve these tensions too quickly, the study establishes a clear rationale for further inquiry, positioning the research as a timely and necessary intervention.

While the review identifies several underexplored areas in the literature, its primary strength lies in articulating a tension between normative commitments and empirical findings. *This framing moves beyond a simple gap-spotting*

exercise, showing how the proposed study contributes meaningfully to an ongoing scholarly conversation.