

Paula Petrik
Department of History & Art History
George Mason University
Fairfax, VA 22030
ppetrik@gmu.edu
<http://www.archiva.net>

Paper Critique Guidelines

Paper critiques are always difficult propositions. After all, we have spent some considerable time with one another, and the process is not really anonymous. The purpose of this exercise is simply to indicate to the writer where the paper is strong and where the paper is weak. Often-times it is easier to be critical of an essay than it is to be praiseworthy. A brief glance at any academic journal will demonstrate that the latter attitude prevails. Nonetheless, paper critiques in this class will begin with the good and end with the not-so-good. An eminent scholar once said, in effect, that is just as easy to write a bad book as it is to write good book; the same goes for essays. The same time and effort must go into a not-so-good book or essay as a good book or essay. Perhaps word processors have obviated this distinction. So, in a 1-page, single-spaced paper evaluation, concentrate on the following:

1. You must begin with the strong feature(s) of the essay.

What is good about the essay? In this regard, think about general presentation of the argument. Is there a thesis? Does the rest of the paper carry out the thesis? How does the paper fit in with what we have read, and what large question does the essay attempt to contribute to? Could you easily recap the essay in a sentence or two? Does the essay attempt to integrate the author's findings into the current historical debates? Does the essay have a conclusion? (This is a different proposition from merely restating the thesis.) If the argument is defective, concentrate on where the essay is strong in style, breadth of research, the imaginative use of the research materials, and in general presentation. Finally, think about whether the essay tells a good story or not. Does the author inter-weave specific anecdotes to illustrate a point or present evidence in a convincing manner? Do these illustrations pertain to the point at hand? Is the essay interesting to read? Did the author make good use of illustrations, tables, or charts?

2. End with the weak points in the essay but guide your criticisms by thinking about what improvements the author might make in his or her essay or research in line with the statements and questions outlined above.

The point of this part of the critique is not to devastate the writer but to indicate where the research might be questioned, strengthened, or extended. Do not pull any punches here, but do not be unkind or vicious—to use a nineteenth-century phrase. A university is the place where we might try our mistakes and not suffer inordinately for our thinking or for our risks. But, at the same time, the purpose of writing history is to publish somewhere, sometime. Otherwise, we are garret writers and nothing else; hence, the writing deserves our best critical eye. Think about how a general audience, an academic audience, or a “buff” audience might react. Above all else, is the essay interesting? What would you suggest to make it interesting or captivating? Is the essay stylistically accomplished, or would the writing be improved by re-acquaintance with a style handbook? Do mechanical errors get in the way of easy reading?

Remember: our time is limited; do not criticize an author for an “imaginary essay”—the essay the author might have written “given world enough and time” (“To His Coy Mistress”). In other words, do not criticize a writer for argument and sources beyond the author's effort or the documents' availability. We should be all aware at this point of what is possible and what is not.

3. Last but not least, assign a letter grade to the paper.