

Comments on homeworks 1 & 2

CSC 240, Fall 2005

September 28, 2005

What we want to see in general

The primary purpose of the weekly writing assignment is *not* for you to prove that you have done the reading, but instead is for you to present original thoughts about that reading. Of course, to do this you will have to do the reading, unless you are either very smart or very lucky. What we want to see is evidence that the text has gone through your head, mingled with whatever else is up there, and has then been put down on paper in a way that is pleasurable for us to read. It might even be the case that we'd prefer for you to show that you'd read only a small portion of the text and thought about it at some depth. You don't have to discuss everything that the author said, and as a general rule the more portions you attempt to talk about, the less deeply your paper will be. Try to teach us something.

In addition to teaching you about the brain, this course wants to make you into a better writer. You can never be too good of a writer. To this end, here are some comments on what we've seen so far, and how it is different from what we (the TAs and Dr. Ballard) would like to see.

Writing book reviews

There was evidently some confusion among many of you about what constitutes a book review. As Dr. Ballard mentioned in class, book reviews don't get any better than the ones you find in the New York Times, so they will serve as our gold standard. It would be a good idea to skim a few of them, to get an idea of what we would like to see in future book reviews. To aid you in this we are distributing one or two such reviews, and encourage you to read some others.

Book reviews are *evaluative* writing, which means that you should be telling us both what is good and what is bad about the book. As you have probably learned before, whenever you write something you should always have firmly in mind the answers to (at least) the questions

- (1) What is my purpose in writing this? (*purpose*)
- (2) Who will be reading it? (*audience*)

Roughly speaking, the first question informs the content and the second question motivates the style (I won't talk about audience because I didn't notice as many problems with that). The *purpose* of a book review is to tell busy people whether they should part with their valuable time to read the book under consideration. It might be helpful to think of the following situation: Someone has just asked you whether you (having read chapter 2 of Dr. Ballard's book) think they (having not read it) should read it. With this purpose in mind, it should be clear that writing a point-by-point *summary* of a chapter/book/essay is not answering the question. You would never respond to such a request by summarizing what was in the book. That is what many of you did, however.

In general, if you are having a difficult time getting started, you could frame the purpose question in many different ways, and often the form of the question you choose can go a good way towards getting you started with your writing. If "What is my purpose in writing this essay" doesn't help, try rephrasing it as

“Was this book worth reading?”, or “Did I learn anything useful?”, or even “Would I wish this book on my worst enemies?”. Your answers, or lack of them, can tell you what to write. Also try to answer, what is the author trying to do with this book? How effective was she? Are there major holes in her reasoning? How well was the content presented? All of these questions can help you effectively describe to the reader why she should (not) read the book.

Another way to say this is to say that a book review is not the book itself, but instead is about the book. A “review” that lists all the points of the book in sequence is really just the book again, in shortened form. A book review should be something distinct from the book itself, something that incorporates the thoughts, experiences, and opinions of reviewer. It should add value to the book, like a good conversation. A reader who reads a good book review, and then goes on to read the book for herself, often reads the book in light of that evaluation, and finds herself comparing her own reactions to those of the reviewer. A summary can never do this.

Finally, a book review should be interesting, and even fun, to read. There is a reason that people turn directly to the book reviews in the *Sunday Times*. Book reviews are great because they allow the writer to discuss whatever she would like to so long as she can make it passably relevant to the discussion about the book. You may have noticed in the provided reviews that the authors bring in history, background, quotes, stories, and anecdotes, all to help you decide whether this is a book you’d like to read. It makes them look smart and it makes for interesting reading.

Notes on criticism

Criticism is a fine art, and so we would like to make a few comments on what we’ve seen so far in people’s attempts. One thing we’ve seen in the first two assignments is a lot of gratuitous disrespect and derision toward the author of the text. There certainly are writings that call for witty, acerbic, and even condescending remarks, but it is a line that must be tread carefully. There are some general rules to follow: Treat the author of the text you are reviewing with respect. Assume she has done his best. Assume she has good motivations, and that she believes what she has written very strongly. Write as if she were smarter than you. Be willing to grant that there are probably areas in which this is the case. Doing these things will help you make better, more reasoned points.

We understand that the first assignment was somewhat tricky, because you were asked to write something that (ideally) would be indistinguishable from the criticisms of Penrose’ peers. It is a difficult assignment to be asked to criticize someone with the intelligence of Penrose on a topic with which you are much less familiar than him, and at least a few of you tried to compensate for not knowing what to write by being dismissive and rude, perhaps thinking that this is the way things are commonly done in scientific literature.

Note that disrespect doesn’t comprise only *ad hominem* attacks, but also manifests itself in the manner with which you deal with the author’s arguments. For example, one student wrote that Penrose made an “outrageous statement” in quantifying gravity by its mass via Einstein’s famous equation. This isn’t an attack on Penrose directly, but does indict him indirectly by implying that he is the kind of person who could write a statement with such little relation to the truth. It didn’t help that Penrose’ statement was actually a fact. Notice here the danger of an attack: the student was in the wrong, and by making an attack he or she invited the same thing back upon himself. Had he been more respectful he would only have been corrected, and he could have learned something. Violence begets violence, so be very careful that when you resort to it you kill your target and his entire family, so that there is no fear of retribution.

Condescension and derision are tools which should be used very sparingly, much like exclamation points. People often substitute such techniques for good reasoning, because it is easier to react and attack than it is to think. In other words, it is often easier to convey how smart you are by suggesting someone else is stupid, than it is to by arguing with what they have said. We all knew people who worked this way on the playground, and unfortunately some people operate this way even as adults. The thing to remember is that as scientists, our shared goal is to advance the state of knowledge. And as people who are working collectively towards that goal, we are called to a higher standard of behavior. That can help you decide whether a scathing comment you’d like to write is justified.

We do want to emphasize that there *are* situations that call for vituperative remarks against an author's writing or even the author herself. Before you do so, be careful that the situation on hand is one of those situations.

Resources

Here are two example reviews from the *New York Times* Book Review.

<http://www.cs.rochester.edu/~post/TA/240/files/nytbr-davies.pdf>
<http://www.cs.rochester.edu/~post/TA/240/files/nytbr-dennett.pdf>