

1. Different types of writing at university

In your studies at Swinburne, you will be asked to produce a range of different assignment types. The main types (or 'genres') include: essays, reports, book/article reviews, literature reviews.

The following table sets out some of the differences between these genres. In this module we will look at on the book/article review. The materials are focused on the discussion of a particular text: Alone Together: Why we expect more from technology and less from each other, a book that explores how our personal relationships are changing as a result of digital technology.

A sample review written about this text is shown at the end of these materials.

Genres	Description	Conventional Structure	Research base	Format and style
Essay	An extended task that usually requires you to present an argument in response to a question or issue	Introduction Body* Conclusion References *Body – students need to develop the structure of the body, based on the particular question they are dealing with and the argument they wish to present.	Based on wide-reading of books, journal articles etc. around the topic	Formal academic style Personal pronouns ('I') sometimes permitted Paragraphing very important to indicate essay structure Subheadings may be used, but not essential Extensive use of citations
Report	A task that usually requires you to investigate a situation, problem etc. Often involves making recommendations for some action to be taken	Executive summary Introduction Method Findings Conclusions Recommendations References The structure may vary depending on the type of report	Based on background reading on the topic; also often involves collecting/ analysing primary material (eg. interviews, data etc)	Formal academic style No use of personal pronouns ('I') Subheadings with numbered sections essential (eg. 1, 1.1 etc.) Concise, 'to the point' style Some use of citations
Book / article review	A task that requires you to summarise the main content of an article, book, website etc, and then provide an evaluation of this content	Introduction Summary of text Evaluation of text Conclusion	Usually based on the close reading of a single text – but can also include reference to other related readings	Formal academic style Personal pronouns ('I') usually permitted Paragraphing important to indicate review structure
Literature review	A task requiring the collecting, summarising, and evaluation of a range of texts around a particular topic	Introduction Theme 1 Theme 2 Theme 3 etc. Conclusion References	Based on wide and critical reading of state of the art journal articles, books etc.	Formal academic style Personal pronouns ('I') sometimes permitted Subheadings used to structure different themes of review High use of citations

Table 1: The more common genres of university study

2. The REVIEW genre

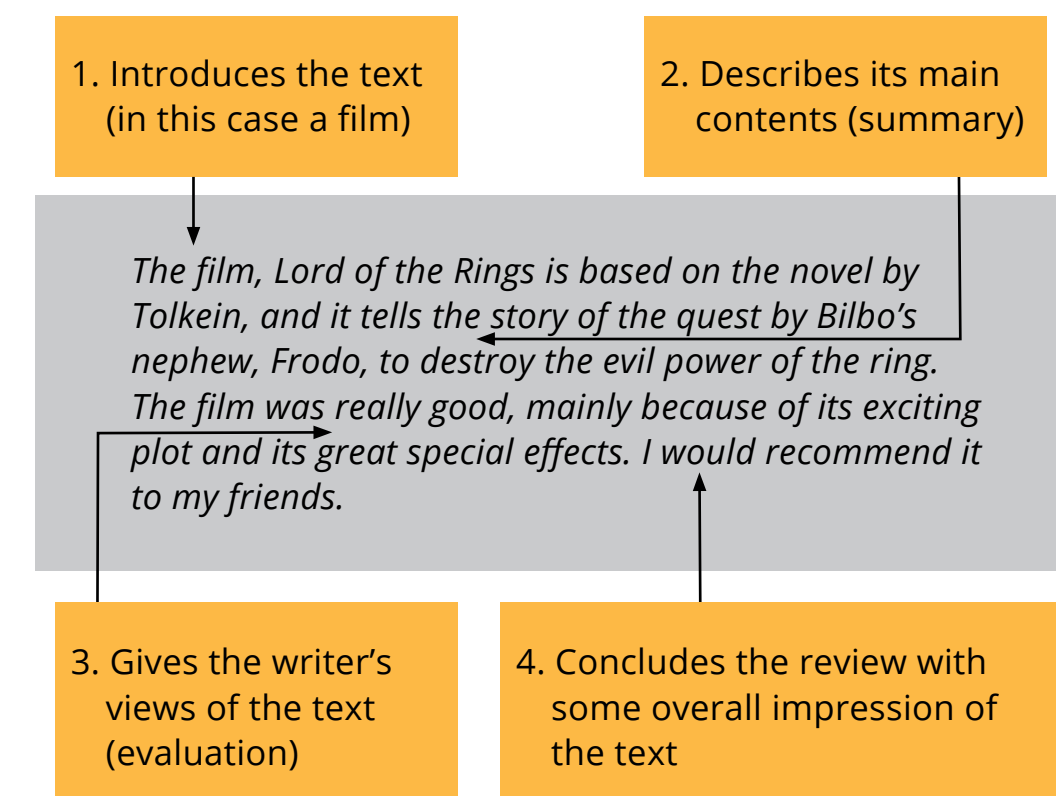
You are probably familiar with the idea of writing reviews from your primary and secondary education. A review can be of any type of text, that is to say 'text' used in the broader sense of the word – for example, a book, a website, a film and so on.

The following is a very simple review written by a primary school student about a popular film.

A simple review

The film, Lord of the Rings is based on the novel by Tolkein, and it tells the story of the quest by Bilbo's nephew, Frodo, to destroy the evil power of the ring. The film was really good, mainly because of its exciting plot and its great special effects. I would recommend it to my friends.

This is a simple piece of writing, but you will notice that it includes the basic structural components of the review genre.



Note how in this review, the student is very positive about the subject of the review *Lord of the Rings* – as many people have been who have seen this film. In a review, being positive is one response; equally you might conclude that the text you are considering is disappointing in some way, and so you might focus more on its negative aspects. In a well-balanced review, it is a good approach to aim to give an account of both the positive and negative features of a text – at least as you see them.

In your university studies, the texts you deal with will be of an academic nature – usually research articles, book chapters or even whole books related to the disciplines you are studying. The ways you evaluate these texts will obviously be more complex than the way this is done in the student’s film review above. However, the overall requirements of the review genre are not so different – that is, you need to:

- i) **introduce** the text you are reviewing;
- ii) **summarise** its main contents
- iii) **give your views** of the text (evaluation)
- iv) **conclude** by giving your overall impression of the text

ACTIVITY 1: Thinking about text

Think about a text you have read recently. It could be any type of text – a novel, a magazine article, a comic even. How would you summarise its main contents? What did you think about the text? What did you find appealing about it (its strengths)? What was less successful (its weaknesses)? What was your overall impression?

3. The FORMAT of review assignments

Critical review assignments are presented by lecturers in different ways. Sometimes you will simply be asked to “write a review” as in the following example:

Sample review task 1 (simple format)

*Write a critical * review of the first chapter of Sherry Turkle’s book Alone Together: Why we expect more from technology and less from each other.*

(1,000 words)

** ‘critical’ here means commenting on the text’s strengths and weaknesses; it does not mean necessarily focusing on the negative aspects of the text (or ‘criticising’ it).*

In tasks such as this, you just need to follow the outline we have suggested above – that is introduce the text, summarise it, provide some evaluation of it, and then conclude your review.

Other times, the task will be presented in a more elaborate way, as in the following example. Like essay questions, these more elaborate review tasks need to be read carefully, so that you are sure you understand exactly what the task requires you to do:

Sample review task 2 (more elaborate format)

Sherry Turkle, a professor of society and technology, has written extensively about the effects of technology on human relationships. Read chapter 1 (Connectivity and its discontents) from her book Alone Together: Why we expect more from technology and less from each other. What evidence does Turkle provide for her main argument that technology has served to diminish the quality of our relationships? How persuaded are you by this argument?

(1,000 words)

ACTIVITY 2: Task analysis

Re-read Sample review task 2 (above), and answer the following questions: i) In this review task, what aspects of the chapter do you need to focus on in the summary part? ii) What is the main thing you need to consider when it comes to evaluating the text?

See page 6 for answers

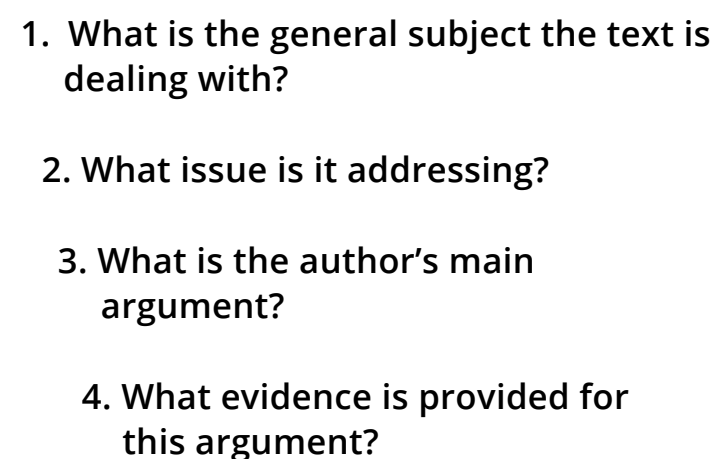
3.1 How to approach the reading for an academic REVIEW?

When you sit down to read a text for review, there are several questions you should keep uppermost in your mind:

1. What is the general **subject** the author is dealing with in this text?
2. What is the specific **issue** they are addressing? Put another way, what question(s) is the author seeking to answer in this text?
3. What is the main thing they are saying about this issue? In other words, what is their **argument**?
4. How does the author support this argument? What **evidence** do they draw upon to persuade you as the reader?
5. Does the author manage to **persuade** us, both in the argument and ideas they present, and in the evidence they use? What are the text's strengths and weaknesses?

The first four questions are concerned with coming to an overall understanding of the text you are considering; the last is about your response to it. It is fair to say that your response will not really be a valid one if you haven't first grasped what the text is fundamentally about.

You will notice that the first four questions move from more general aspects of the text to more specific ones, as in the following:

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1. What is the general subject the text is dealing with?
 2. What issue is it addressing?
 3. What is the author's main argument?
 4. What evidence is provided for this argument?

Following this sequence can help you to an understanding of the text as a whole. The first thing you need to do is get an overview of the text – begin by thinking about the text's title; read the blurb (description on the back of a book) or the abstract (the short summary at the beginning of a research article); note the author's background; look at the table of contents, browse through the whole text, looking at headings and subheadings as you go. Many of these text elements will help you get a feel for the text overall, and help you to answer some of the questions above.

ACTIVITY 3: Surveying a blurb

Below is a blurb of Sherry Turkle's book: *Alone Together: Why we expect more from technology and less from each other*. Read the blurb, and see if you can answer some of the survey questions that we have discussed:

- i) What is the general subject area the author is dealing with in the text?
- ii) What is the main issue she is addressing?
- iii) Can you get a sense of her main argument – i.e. the position she adopts in relation to this issue?
- iv) Do you have a sense of the type of evidence Turkle draws upon to support her argument?

See page 6 for answers

Blurb: Alone together

Consider Facebook – it's human contact, only easier to engage with, and also easier to avoid. Our new technologies promise closeness. Sometimes they deliver, but much of our modern life leaves us less connected with people and more connected with simulations of them.

*In her book *Alone Together*, Sherry Turkle, a professor of technology and society explores how our new tools are dramatically altering our lives and our relationships. Based on a series of interviews with users, Turkle's book gives us a nuanced exploration of what we are looking for – but also what we are losing – in the brave new world of digital connectivity.*

Once you have done your initial surveying of the text, it is time to launch into a careful reading of it. Take notes as you go. Keep the questions above in mind, and in the process of reading, begin to ask yourself the all important final evaluative questions – am I persuaded by this text? (What seem to be its strengths as a text? What are its weaknesses?). In asking these questions, you should also think about your overall assessment of the text – is your impression overall a positive or negative one?

4. How do I structure a REVIEW?

The following is a simple template you can use initially to structure a review:

Introduction
Body
Conclusion
List of references

In any review, it is important to get the right proportions around these sections. Perhaps the main issue is to be sure that you don't spend too much time summarising the text (saying what it's about), without leaving enough space to provide your evaluations of it (saying what you thought about it).

The following would be an acceptable allocation of words for a review of about 1000 words.

Introduction	(100 words)
Summary	(300-400 words)
Evaluation	(400-500 words)
Conclusion	(100 words)

As you develop your thoughts about the text you are reviewing, you can start to add some detail in your review structure, especially around the summary and evaluation sections. The following would be one way that a review structure could be developed.

Introduction	(100 words)
Summary	(300-400 words)
Main idea #1	
Main idea #2	
Main idea #3	
Evaluation	(400-500 words)
Positive feature #1	
Positive feature #2	
Negative feature #1	
Negative feature #2	
Conclusion	(100 words)

ACTIVITY 4: Thinking about structure

The sample structure above suggests a fairly neutral evaluation of the text being reviewed; that is to say there is an equal emphasis on 'positive' and 'negative' features of the text.

How do you think this evaluation section should be structured if your overall response to the text was a negative one? Or a positive one?

See page 7 for answers

5. How do I SUMMARISE a text?

In writing a summary, it is important to bear in mind that the task before you is to provide *your* summary of the text – that is you need to show how *you* have understood the text in your reading of it. Part of this is getting some distance from the text – and not relying too much on the actual wording used by the author.

One way of getting this distance is to you use lots of **reporting expressions**, such as:

The author's *main argument* is that
Turtle *expresses* a number of concerns about ...
According to Turtle
She *suggests* that

When you do use the actual words of the author, you should use direct quotes – and also provide the page number – as in the following:

"We would rather text than talk", Turtle explains (p 17).

Otherwise you should seek to paraphrase (i.e. put into your own words)

Another way to get this distance – and to show your own understanding – is to impose your own structure on the summary. You can do this by giving emphasis to what you see as the main ideas in the text. Use organising expressions such as:

One key idea discussed in the text is that ...
Another point highlighted is that ...

ACTIVITY 5: Analysing summary writing

Look at the sample paragraph below, which comes from a review written on the Sherry Turkle chapter. In this extract, see if you can identify:

- i) an organising expression
- ii) a range of reporting expressions
- iii) a direct quote

See page 7 for answers

Summary extract

Another major concern of the author is the way that communications technology has come to overwhelm our lives. Turkle points out that it used to be the case that we kept computers busy; now the relationships is reversed, and it is they that keep us busy. This is seen in the growing phenomenon of multitasking. Turkle quotes a number of examples of this - of a granddaughter who feels guilty for distractedly doing her emails while skyping with her sick grandmother; of participants at a conference being focused more on finessing their own upcoming presentations than paying attention to the speaker whose session they are in. All this relentless communication, Turkle suggests, has led to a perverse dependence on the technology: "whether or not our devices are in use, without them we feel disconnected, adrift" (p. 16).

6. How do I EVALUATE a text?

There are many aspects of an academic text you can consider when you are evaluating it. In broad terms however, there are two main dimensions of the text you need to think about:

- The quality of the argument/ideas being presented
- The extent to which these arguments/ideas are supported by evidence, examples etc.

Under the first of these dimensions (quality of ideas), the following are some questions you can ask of your text:

- i) Are these ideas interesting? Do they provide a new and thoughtful perspective on their subject matter?
- ii) Are these ideas consistent? Are there any contradictions or inconsistencies in what the writer is saying?
- iii) Are these ideas practical? Can they be applied in some way, for example to solve a social problem?
- iv) Are these ideas relevant? eg. to Australians, to women, to modern society?

Under the second dimension (quality of evidence), the following are some questions you can ask of your text:

- i) What kind of evidence is used to support the ideas presented?
- ii) Is adequate evidence provided?
- iii) Is evidence used in a fair way?
- iv) Are you aware of any counter-evidence that casts doubt on the claims being made?

ACTIVITY 6: Analysing evaluative writing

Look at the two sample paragraphs below - which come from a review written on the Sherry Turkle chapter. One provides a negative evaluation of the text; the other is positive.

Which is which? What does the review writer think is positive about the text? What is the negative feature they have identified?

See page 7 for answers

Evaluation paragraph 1

Turkle's argument is an interesting and challenging one, and she manages to draw on numerous real life stories to vividly illustrate her points. Many of these stories are familiar ones, and capture well the frustrations and annoyances many of us can feel when confronted with some of the less impressive uses of digital communications ...

Evaluation paragraph 2

One problem in Turkle's text concerns the evidence she uses to support her case. As noted, the main data used in her study are interviews with people from various walks of life about their experiences of digital technology. We note however, that virtually all the stories recounted in the chapter are ones that illustrate some personally dissatisfying experience. One has the impression that Turkle is only interested in the negatives of the virtual world, and in this sense the study seems a biased one.

We have suggested a range of questions you can ask about a text – and these will be relevant to many of the academic review tasks you are set. You will find however, that in certain cases, you will need to evaluate texts according to quite specific criteria, ones that are relevant to the specific type of text you are considering, or the discipline you are studying in.

For example, if your task is to evaluate a business website, you are likely to do this according to the following types of criteria: accessibility, interactivity, look and feel, clarity of language etc.

Similarly, if you are evaluating a psychology research article, you will fashion your evaluative criteria to fit with this particular type of text, for example: whether the method used seems an appropriate one; whether the data has been interpreted in a valid way; whether overall the study seemed to be a worthwhile one to conduct.

In these more specific contexts, your lecturer will usually spell out the criteria you need to draw on in evaluating a text.

7. A sample review

It's now time to look at a sample review. It is a full review written of the Sherry Turkle text – the first chapter of her book *Alone Together: Why we expect more from technology and less from each other*.

You haven't had a chance to read the original Turkle text. Before you read the review, however, you might like to hear the author discussing her ideas about the world of virtual relationships in a short public lecture: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MtLVCpZliNs>

To find out how all the above looks in practice, read the Sample Critical Review:

http://www.swinburne.edu.au/student/study-help/las/resources/Sample_Text_3_Critical_Review_Turkle.pdf

8. Activity answers

ACTIVITY 2: SUGGESTED ANSWERS

- i) You need to focus on the argument presented in the text, and the evidence used to support this argument.
- ii) You need to think about how **persuaded** you are by this argument and the evidence that is used.

[Return to Activity 2.](#)

ACTIVITY 3: SUGGESTED ANSWERS

- i) New communication technologies
- ii) What effects are these new technologies having on our relationships?
- iii) The author, Turkle, appears to have concerns about these effects (i.e. 'what we are losing')
- iv) People's experiences, as described by them in interviews

[Return to Activity 3.](#)

ACTIVITY 4: POSSIBLE ANSWERS

If your response overall was a NEGATIVE one, the evaluation section could be structured in one of two ways:

Evaluation	Evaluation
Positive feature #1	Negative feature #1
Negative feature #1	Negative feature #2
Negative feature #2	Negative feature #3
Negative feature #3	Positive feature #1

In the first structure, you would first ACKNOWLEDGE some positive feature of the text, before bringing in your criticisms of it. The alternative approach would be to focus initially on the negatives before CONCEDED some positive feature at the end of your evaluation.

If your response overall was a POSITIVE, the structures above would be reversed.

[Return to Activity 4.](#)

ACTIVITY 5: SUGGESTED ANSWERS

Summary extract

Organising expression

Reporting expressions

Direct quote

Another major concern of the author is the way that communications technology has come to overwhelm our lives. Turkle points out that it used to be the case that we kept computers busy; now the relationships is reversed, and it is they that keep us busy. This is seen in the growing phenomenon of multitasking. Turkle quotes a number of examples of this - of a granddaughter who feels guilty for distractedly doing her emails while skyping with her sick grandmother; of participants at a conference being focused more on finessing their own upcoming presentations than paying attention to the speaker whose session they are in. All this relentless communication, Turkle suggests, has led to a perverse dependence on the technology: "whether or not our devices are in use, without them we feel disconnected, adrift" (p. 16).

[Return to Activity 5.](#)

ACTIVITY 6: SUGGESTED ANSWERS

- Paragraph 1 = positive evaluation; Paragraph 2 = negative evaluation
- The positive feature is that the argument is thought to be interesting (it is also well illustrated with real life stories)
- The negative feature relates to the author's use of evidence – the writer of the review believes it has been used in a 'biased' way.

[Return to Activity 6.](#)