

Writing a Critical Review

You are probably familiar with the review genre such as film reviews or book reviews. A critical review is similar, as it is based on a close and detailed reading and evaluation of a text or comparison of multiple texts on the same topic. The type of texts you may be asked to review could include books, articles, reports, websites, or films.

1. Purpose
2. Structure
3. Writing style
4. Example

NOTE: Citation style is APA 7th Edition. Modify for other citation styles.

1. Purpose

To summarise and evaluate a text, pointing out the strengths and weaknesses.

2. Structure of a critical review

- Review of a single text:
 - Introduction
 - Summary of the text
 - Evaluation of the text (may be positive and/or negative)
 - Conclusion
 - References
- Review of two or more texts:
 - In addition to the above, include a comparison of the texts you are reviewing
 - You could follow either of the structures below:

Structure 1	Structure 2
Introduction	Introduction
Summary of texts 1 and 2	Summary of text 1
	Evaluation of text 1
Evaluation and comparison of texts 1 and 2	Summary of text 2
	Evaluation of text 2
	Comparison of texts 1 and 2
Conclusion	Conclusion
References	References

3. Writing style

- Formal academic writing and referencing
- Use of first-person pronoun (“I”) to indicate your response (may be appropriate, but always check with your unit coordinator)
- Use of evaluative language to appraise/assess the work
- Use of transition signals to indicate direction of argument and linking of ideas

4. Sample critical review

The critical review below has been developed from the following source with kind permission of the publishing journal, *Austrian Journal of South-East Asian Studies*, and the author, Dr Jera Lego.

Lego, J. (2018). Book review: Vatikiotis, M. (2017). *Blood and silk: Power and conflict in modern Southeast Asia*. *Austrian Journal of South-East Asian Studies*, 11(2), 243-244.
<https://aseas.univie.ac.at/index.php/aseas/article/download/2157/1974>

references to the text and rhetorical moves of author evaluative language organising principle evidence type words
 and rhetorical moves of author in-text citations logical connectors

Vatikiotis M. (2017). *Blood and silk: Power and conflict in modern Southeast Asia*. Weidenfeld & Nicolson. Starts with the bibliographic details of the work.

Michael Vatikiotis’ *Blood and Silk: Power and Conflict in Modern Southeast Asia* is an impassioned commentary on the state of affairs in a region that appears phenomenal for its rapid economic growth but at the same time perplexing because of intractable corruption and conflict. The author raises questions and highlights paradoxes regarding problems of governance and democratization and then tries to address these questions by citing colonial legacies and failures in institution building, as well as anecdotes from his experience as a journalist, mediator, student, and long-time observer of the region. Introduces the author and the title of the text
Uses descriptive language to judge/appraise the text
Summarises the author’s main argument

The book is divided into two sections. Part I: *Power* covers the geopolitical features and the long sweep of precolonial, colonial, and postcolonial history that has led to the present state of what he calls a “demi-democracy” (p. 295), characterized by a persistence of violence, personality-driven and clientelistic politics, pernicious graft and corruption, lack of institutional integrity, and little respect for laws. Part II: *Conflict* deals with what Vatikiotis considers the most pressing concerns for the region – unresolved conflicts borne of contested identities, growing religious sectarianism and extremism, and the (re)emergence of a powerful China that is “no longer hiding its strength” (p. 282). Provides a brief outline/summary of the sections
Direct quotes from the text give voice to the author and illustrate or support a point

Vatikiotis asks, for instance, why Southeast Asian countries rank poorly in freedom and good governance indices despite social and material progress, and why democracy has proven hard to establish. He dispels the notion that this is because social change has lagged behind political transformation, reasoning that Southeast Asians are better educated than ever. Instead, he points to the weak institutional roots of democratic reform and shallow, personality-based politics that drive Summarises the main points and evidence presented in the text and is organised around questions and answers, referring to the author, and using

Indicates the type of evidence presented in the text Highlights organising principle of the review – around questions and answers

change, if any. Related to this, he poses the often repeated but seldom satisfactorily answered question of why graft and corruption persist and offers several answers including the fact that governments are poorly financed, that bribery serves to maintain deeply entrenched social hierarchies, and that this ultimately serves to control the elite and fuel systems of patronage. This is consistent with much of the literature on Southeast Asia highlighting elite-driven, clientelistic, patronage relationships as characteristic of politics and governance in the region (see for example Higgot & Robison, 1985, pp. 27-28; Robison, 2012).

reporting verbs and phrases to indicate his position

Positively appraises the text

Brings in the work of other authors to support or illustrate a point

Vatikiotis' assessment of the influence of colonial legacies on the present state of affairs seems accurate, though not new to students of the region. "The seeds of subnational conflict lie in the process of modern state formation, which involved the disruption of precolonial autonomous principalities and the birth of the cohesive, centralised nation state" (p. 201), he writes of deeply rooted conflicts in Southern Thailand and Aceh. "The shallow basis for this unity," moreover, "was built on an administrative framework steeped in colonial exigency and historical prejudices. Imperfect integration and forced assimilation became the conductors of grievance that eventually generated violence [...] As new states struggled to establish themselves, rebellions erupted along poorly defined borders and fault lines of social and ethnic division" (p. 204). Indeed, contemporary fractures in Malaysia and Myanmar, for instance, can be traced back to the colonial administrative divisions under British rule, as discussed in most textbooks dealing with the colonial history of the region (see for example, Smith, 1991, pp. 40-53)

Organisation is around questions, answers, assessments

Evaluates the author's argument.

Direct quotes from the text

Brings in the work of other authors to support or illustrate a point

However, in attempting to distill conclusions about such a diverse region, Vatikiotis risks overly generalizing and seeing the region as more exceptional than it might be. Writing again about unresolved conflicts, Vatikiotis declares that motives ascribed to sovereignty only disguise selfish personal interest – compromise in Southeast Asia is seen as a sign of weakness and loss of face (p. 224). This however may be just as true in hierarchical societies of Northeast Asian countries with deep cultural sensitivities related to "losing face". He writes of the "perpetual selfishness of Southeast Asian elites" (p. 286) and how, "more than any other part of the world today that claims to adhere for the most part to democratic principles of government and has the GDP to do so, Southeast Asia fails chronically to deliver on the promise of popular sovereignty" (p. 286). One might be harder pressed to identify any part of the world where elites unselfishly gave up power and delivered popular sovereignty at no cost to their privilege. Elsewhere, the author may verge on exaggeration. He describes Thailand as "a singularly archaic state" (p. 290) that has managed to perpetuate elite power and privilege through a strong military and much revered monarchy. Surely, there are other regions of the world where more antiquated practices survive even though Thailand's military and monarchy are indeed profoundly influential if it were to be compared to modern liberal democracies.

Signals a shift from summarizing and positively appraising the text to a negative appraisal of the text

Evaluates the argument/evidence; Uses descriptive language/adjectives

Cites the author; quotes the text

Evaluates the argument/evidence;

This is perhaps one problem of Vatikiotis' and many others' approach to understanding Southeast Asia – the assumption that economic growth would lead to liberal values and democratic governance. Indeed, some contemporary academic discussions on the politics of Southeast Asia have evolved from asking why democratization has failed, to why non-democratic forms of governance persist. In other words, much of the contemporary discourse has evolved to the question of

Presents counter-evidence

Assessment of author's evidence – based on an assumption

lasting authoritarianism (see Rodan, 2018) – something that the author fails to mention.

Brings in the work of other authors to support or illustrate a point

The book takes the reader on a fascinating but exasperating journey informed by history and established scholarship on the politics of Southeast Asia. However, it does not necessarily reveal anything new or challenge any existing studies. Rather, it reads more like a personal lamentation by an ardent follower. "As someone who has never really felt attached to a particular country in the patriotic sense, watching the simple ceremony", Vatikiotis writes of an independence day celebration in Indonesia, "I catch myself feeling a tinge of attachment, a desire to belong to this ambitious, somewhat improbable nation" (pp. 288-289). Vatikiotis certainly does not pretend to be a detached observer but, in doing so, he may well convert a casual observer to a dedicated advocate for political change in such a pivotal region.

Concludes the review of the text;

Evaluates the text

Summarises the reviewer's response to the text

Cites the author; quotes the text

Provides a final assessment of the possible influence of the text

References

Higgott, R. & Robison, R. (with Hewison, K. J. & Rodan, G.). (1985). Theories of development and underdevelopment: Implications for the study of Southeast Asia. In R. Higgott & R. Robison (Eds.), *Southeast Asia: Essays in the political economy of structural change* (pp. 16-61). Routledge & Kegan Paul.

List of references for additional works cited in the review

Robison, R. (2012). Interpreting the politics of Southeast Asia: Debates in parallel universes. In R. Robison (Ed.), *Routledge handbook of Southeast Asian politics* (pp. 5-22). Routledge.

Rodan, G. (2018). *Participation without democracy: Containing conflict in Southeast Asia*. Cornell University Press.

Smith, M. (1991). *Burma: Insurgency and the politics of ethnicity*. Zed Books.