

## Critical Responses (CRs)

*This response format is to be used for secondary sources. Secondary sources are reconstructions (or interpretations) of the past or commentary on ideas of someone else. Most of what any one person knows about the past comes from reading secondary sources, since it would take a lifetime, or more, to master and interpret the primary sources for any one historical period and place. Secondary sources also help frame the questions that motivate and guide research in primary sources. For both those reasons, it is important to be attentive and critical—not necessarily in a negative sense—when reading secondary sources.*

### Specific Guidelines

*The following questions are not meant to be all answered in a critical response should be answered in your critique, and indeed, given the brevity of each critique, that would be impossible. Rather they are examples of ways to assess the value of each source to your argument and the topic under study.*

1. What is the author's thesis/argument—the main point she is trying to establish?
2. What are the important parts of his argument?
3. What sources are used to support the argument? What reasons/evidence does s/he use to make that argument? Do the reasons/evidence support the author's argument?
4. Did a source offer a new perspective or contradictory information?
5. Does the author consider alternative explanations and arguments? How does the account compare with other sources that you have consulted?
6. How successfully does the author support his thesis? Does the argument convince you? Do the sources support the argument adequately? What questions does the source raise for you?
7. Who is the author and does s/he have credentials or experience that make them trustworthy?

*All these questions are interrelated; your paper should not be a simply a list of answers to individual questions, but a coherent essay with an introduction and conclusion. It is not a book report, which would address only the first three questions; instead, it is a critical essay or critique of the source.*

*Finally, remember that if you judge a source “great,” “terrible” or with some other descriptor, include a specific statement about why it was great or terrible. For example, you might say something like, “This book was incredibly helpful” and then add the specific, “as it laid out the varied ways that historians have interpreted the conditions under slavery over the past 60 years.”*

**General Guidelines:**

1. Keep each critique to 1-2 pages long.
2. “Critique” in this case does not mean that you need to be negative about the source. Rather it means that you need to analyze and question each source. Just remember not to be a total cheerleader. Use your own argument to help you choose how and where to focus your critique. Also, address or discuss counter-arguments and bring in different perspectives, sources or views in your response.

**Some other questions that can help include:**

How did each source help you construct your argument and inform your synthesis of the sources?

What sources stopped you in your tracks and made you reconsider how you were thinking? What sources reinforced your ideas?

Did a source offer a new perspective or contradictory information?

Which sources helped you with background knowledge or pointed you towards other useful sources to consult?

How did this source’s content or perspective compare with other sources you consulted?