Critical Reading and Fair Evaluation

In order to write an effective critique, it is necessary to engage in critical reading combined with critical thinking about both what is given in a text and what is not. Also important is your evaluation of how the text delivers its message. Critical reading is more than simply reading carefully. Your reading should allow you to evaluate other work by making inferences and interpretations. This involves taking into account what you already know, have read, or perhaps have recently learned in a course. By synthesizing all of these elements you can reveal not only what you know, but also what you think about published work in relation to some reasonable criteria.

As you read critically and formulate your evaluation, it is also important to be fair. To be fair in your evaluation also keep in mind the genre you are dealing with. Expectations for a conference abstract are, of course, different from those for a research paper.

"Tact is the art of making a point without making an enemy."
- Isaac Newton

Offering Praise and Negative Criticism: A balancing act

Remember that a critical analysis of a work is an attempt to contribute positively to the greater body of research in an area. It is a kind of conversation that enhances understanding and invites discussion and further commentary. Just as you strive to be polite and respectful in real-life conversations, your analysis, while being honest, forthright, and incisive, should reflect respect for the author you are critiquing. Reflecting such respect, finesse, and tact will result in a polished and graceful writing style.

Negative Criticism

While negative criticism is to be expected, thinking only negatively is probably ill-advised. If you do offer a negative critique, consider offering something positive with the negative. The pairing of a positive and a negative can soften the criticism.

This article provides a thorough analysis of how salt damages concrete. However, no suggestions are offered as to how to mitigate the damage.

Although the author makes a strong case that journal articles written in languages other than English may have limited impact, she fails to recognize that they may be important at the regional level.

Which comes first: The chicken or the egg? Umm, that is, the positive or the negative? How does the emphasis change depending on the information you place first?
In this ambitious, but flawed study, the authors attempt to show that domesticated animals are in some way just as responsible as automobiles for our current CO$_2$ imbalance.

In this flawed, but ambitious study, the authors attempt to show that domesticated animals are in some way just as responsible as automobiles for our current CO$_2$ imbalance. "Ac-Cent-Tchu-Ate the Positive" published in 1944

A strategy called “hedging” will help you express praise or criticism with varying levels of strength. It will also help you express varying levels of certainty in your own assertions. Grammatical structures used for hedging include:

**Modal verbs**
Using modal verbs (could, can, may, might, etc.) allows you to soften an absolute statement. Compare:

This text is inappropriate for graduate students who are new to the field.
This text may be inappropriate for graduate students who are new to the field.

**Qualifying adjectives and adverbs**
Using qualifying adjectives and adverbs (possible, likely, possibly, somewhat, etc.) allows you to introduce a level of probability into your comments. Compare:

Readers will find the theoretical model difficult to understand.
Some readers will find the theoretical model difficult to understand.
Some readers will probably find the theoretical model somewhat difficult to understand completely.

Note: You can see from the last example that too many qualifiers makes the idea sound undesirably weak.

**Tentative verbs**
Using tentative verbs (seems, indicates, suggests, etc.) also allows you to soften an absolute statement. Compare:

This omission shows that the authors are not aware of the current literature.
This omission indicates that the authors are not aware of the current literature.
This omission seems to suggest that the authors are not aware of the current literature.