

Tips on Making Negative Critiques Sound Positive

When writing book reviews for publication, it is especially important for graduate students to write reviews that maintain a fair, accurate, and politic tone. Here are some rhetorical strategies that can help make even a negative critique sound positive (and polite):¹

Use third person rather than first person.

Negative Example: *I appreciate the fact that this study is based on several strong experiments, but I find it regrettable that the methodological rigor of the first round of experiments was not carried out in the subsequent trials.*

Positive Spin: *This study is based on several strong experiments; regrettably, the methodological rigor of the first round of experiments was not carried out in the subsequent trials.*

When speculating about an author's intention, moderate your critique using modal auxiliaries.

Negative Example: *There is a good possibility that the author chose his archive based on the convenience of its location rather than the quality of the sources it offers.*

Positive Spin: *There is a slight possibility that the author chose his archive based on the convenience of its location rather than the quality of the sources it offers.*

Distance yourself from summary claims as a way of subtly expressing critique.

Negative Example: *The author conducted informal surveys of only 12 women before stating that those who eat after 7pm are likely to be obese.*

Positive Spin: *Based on informal surveys of a dozen women, the author states that those who eat after 7pm are likely to be obese.*

Use less emphatic conditionals.

Negative Example: *The book's argument would have been stronger if it had included more appropriate evidence.*

Positive Spin: *The book's argument might have been stronger if it had included more appropriate evidence.*

Use less evaluative reporting verbs when summarizing the author's claims.

Negative Example: *The author contends that Marxism is a valid political theory.*

Positive Spin: *The author proposes that Marxism is a valid political theory.*

¹ Adapted from John M. Swales and Christine B. Feak, *Academic Writing For Graduate Students*, 2nd Edition (University of Michigan Press, 2004)

Pair adjectives and end with a positive adjective for emphasis.

Negative Example: *In this ambitious but imperfect study, the author attempts to blame Capitalism for all of America's problems.*

Positive Spin: *In this imperfect but ambitious study, the author attempts to blame Capitalism for all of America's problems.*

Pair linking words and phrases in ways that also allow you to finish positively.

Negative Example: *Although the author suggests that graduate students should cultivate their writing skills in as many ways as possible, he fails to see the advantages of writing and publishing book reviews.*

Positive Spin: *Although the author fails to see the advantages of writing book reviews, he does acknowledge that graduate students should cultivate their writing skills in as many ways as possible.*

“Sandwich” your negative message

Negative Example: *Although there are several shortcomings to its methodology, the book still offers excellent case studies that might be used in an undergraduate classroom. Therefore, I would recommend using it to teach lower-level undergraduates, but would hesitate to use it in an upper-level or graduate course.*

Positive Spin: *The book offers excellent case studies that might be put to use in an undergraduate classroom, despite some problems with its methodology. Thus, while I wouldn't recommend using it with upper-level or graduate students, this book would make a great contribution to a lower-level undergraduate course.*



Activity: Read the following passage. Without changing the substance of its critique, how might you rewrite it to make its tone more positive and politic by using the tips provided? As you make changes, remember these tips are meant to soften the tone of the reviewer’s critique, not change the message of the original author; use caution. A sample revision and our commentary on it are provided on the following page.

In *Advising Graduate Students*, History Professor Augustus Richards argues that writing book reviews is a worthy but time consuming activity. He therefore claims that graduate students should carefully consider the number and type of book reviews they write over the course of their student careers. *Advising Graduate Students* is a valuable contribution to the corpus of advice manuals written with graduate students in mind. Combining memoir with more traditional instruction, Richards’ volume also stands out for its applicability to an audience of professors and students alike. However, *Advising Graduate Students* would have been much more persuasive if it had been backed up with opinions of professors from disciplines other than his own, though I admire the care for his former and past students that animates Richards’ advice. As it stands, I would recommend this book to faculty and students in a history department, and imagine it would have positive, yet limited, applicability to other humanities academics. Certainly, I would urge those in social sciences and STEM fields to look elsewhere.

Sample Revision:

In *Advising Graduate Students*, History Professor Augustus Richards posits that writing book reviews is a worthy but time consuming activity. He therefore suggests that graduate students should carefully consider the number and type of book reviews they write over the course of their student careers. Combining memoir with more traditional instruction, *Advising Graduate Students* stands out for its applicability to an audience of professors and students alike. Particularly admirable is the care for former and past students that animates Richards' advice, though his case might have been more persuasive if it had been backed up with opinions of professors from disciplines other than his own. As it stands, this book is not recommended those in social science and STEM fields. Humanities academics outside of history departments, however, should find the book of limited, yet positive, applicability. And I urge faculty and students in history departments to read it. Overall, Richards' *Advising Graduate Students* is a valuable contribution to the corpus of advice manuals written with graduate students in mind.

Revision debrief:

- Don't change the order of adjectives in your summary of the book you are reviewing. Presumably, you chose that order to reflect the order of the arguments themselves.
- Likewise, you probably don't want to change the "should" to "could" or "might" (presuming you are summarizing the author's argument fairly).
- However, consider changing the reporting verbs you use when summarizing his argument "argues" = "posits"; "claims" = "suggests." Make such a decision based on how emphatic you truly feel the author's claims are.
- Begin your own critique with something positive, and (as in this revision) "sandwich" all of your negative critiques into a single section (here this is accomplished by reversing the original "despite" clause and putting the "not recommends" before the "recommends").
- Your critique is the moment to definitely use conditionals more politically. Here, "would" is changed to "might" when describing the persuasiveness of the author's work. In contrast, the more emphatic conditional "should" is used to demonstrate a stronger/more positive recommendation/assessment (for other humanities academics).
- If you choose to use personal pronouns, bear in mind the moment that you will introduce yourself as an "I"). Wait until there are nothing but positive assessments left.
- While writing in 3rd person, use emphatic or comparative constructions (Here "Particularly admirable") to express positive sentiments.
- Invert adjectives when you want to emphasize positive. (Here "positive yet limited" is changed to "limited yet positive.")
- Reserve strong verbs (here "urge") for positive assessment
- Be sure any review concludes with a positive assessment.