Does He or She Succeed in This Purpose?

Critser takes a behavioral approach to the problem of obesity. To the extent that obesity is caused by undisciplined eating habits, his proposal is logical and convincing. But other studies show that not all causes of obesity are rooted in poor eating habits. Genetic makeup and hormone imbalances may also be at work. Critser makes no mention of these, and his analysis and proposed solution therefore seem limited. In addition, he adopts an antifat, judgmental tone in the essay that will likely offend people who are trying to lose weight. In sum, Critser is only partially successful in his argument.

To What Extent Do You Agree or Disagree with the Author? Evaluate Assumptions.

Because Critser’s analysis and proposed solution are based on the assumption that obesity has a single cause (poor eating habits), he opens himself to the objection that he has oversimplified the problem. Still, common sense suggests that overweight and obese people do contribute to their conditions by making unhealthy dietary choices. So Critser’s suggestion that we teach children to eat moderately before they become obese is worth supporting—provided care is taken to acknowledge the nonbehavioral causes of obesity. Critser’s moralistic tone gets in the way of an otherwise reasonable (if limited) argument. Of course, one might object to his tone but continue to find merit in his proposal.

The selections you will be likely to critique are those, like Critser’s, that argue a specific position. Indeed, every argument you read is an invitation to agreement or disagreement. It remains only for you to speak up and justify your position.

**Model Critique**

Critique of Greg Critser’s “Too Much of a Good Thing”

1. Citing statistics on the alarming increase in the rates of childhood obesity, especially in the industrialized West, Greg Critser (L.A. Times Op-Ed, 22 July 2001) argues that parents can help avert obesity in their own homes by more closely supervising the diets of their children, serving reasonably sized portions, and limiting snacks. Critser, who has extensively researched obesity in his book Fat Land: How Americans Become the Fattest People in the World (Houghton Mifflin 2003), argues that through education we can create a leaner cultural norm, much as the French did earlier in the century when faced with a similar problem.

2. The stakes for maintaining a healthy body weight couldn’t be higher. Fully one-quarter of American

*References to Critser are to his article as reprinted in Sequence for Academic Writing.*
children through the age of eighteen “are overweight or obese”—an “epidemic,” according to the United States Surgeon General (66). Not only are obese individuals at increased risk for a wide range of medical problems, but the nation as a whole will absorb enormous costs for their obesity, “eventually mak[ing] the battle against HIV/AIDS seem inexpensive” (66). Clearly we have good reason to fight the rise of obesity, and Critser’s suggestion that individual families become a battleground for that fight makes perfect sense, as long as we realize that there will be other battlegrounds (for example, the hospital, the pharmacy, and the genetics lab). We should also take care that in “stigmatizing the unhealthful behaviors that cause obesity” (66) we do not turn a public health campaign into a moral crusade.

It takes no advanced degree in nutrition to accept the claim that children (indeed, all of us) should learn to eat in moderation. Apparently, before the age of five the lesson isn’t even needed. Younger children, entirely on their own, will limit how much food they eat at a meal regardless of the amounts served. By five, however, they will eat whatever is put before them. In a culture of the “supersized,” high-fat, sugar-loaded, fast-food meal, such lack of restraint can lead to obesity. If we can teach children before their fifth birthday what counts as a reasonable portion, they might learn—for life—to eat in moderation. Critser cites other research to show that simple and yet profound dietary lessons, learned early, can make all the difference in averting a life spent battling the scale. He wisely gives parents an important role in teaching these lessons because parents, after all, teach all sorts of lessons. However, with statistics showing that roughly half of the adult population in this country is overweight or obese, Critser may want to urge parents to learn lessons about moderation themselves before attempting to become teachers for their children.

Critser’s plan for combating the rise of childhood obesity through education is certainly reasonable, as far as it goes. But he focuses almost exclusively on behavioral factors when scientists have discovered that obesity has other, nonbehavioral causes (Gibbs). In labs across the world, researchers are identifying genes and hormones that influence weight gain. No one fully understands all the mechanisms by which overweight people, who may eat as little as their skinnier counterparts, gain or shed pounds. But it is clear that being fat is not simply about lacking willpower—that is, about “unhealthful behaviors” (66) around food. Thus, we should not expect Critser’s approach of teaching
dietary moderation to work in every case. For many people, solutions to weight gain will be found both in new dietary behaviors and in medicines that come from labs where researchers study how the body burns and stores fat. To the extent that obesity is the result of a child’s inability to say “no” to a supersized meal, we should teach restraint just as Critser advises. But his behavioral fix will not work for everyone, and parents should be instructed on what to do when teaching restraint, alone, fails to keep their children reasonably trim.

A more serious problem with Critser’s argument is his use (twice) of the word “gluttony” and the judgmental attitude it implies. Early in the essay Critser argues that American parents need “to promulgate... dietary restraint, something our ancestors knew simply as avoiding gluttony” (66). Gluttony was one of the seven deadly sins (along with pride, greed, envy, anger, lust, and sloth), which Christian theologians have been denouncing for nearly 1500 years (University) to little effect. While Critser insists that “no one should be stigmatized for being overweight,” he advocates “stigmatizing the unhealthful behaviors that cause obesity” (66), assuming that people distinguish between the sin and the sinner. In practice, people rarely do. Critser does little to distance himself from anti-fat bias after introducing the bias-heavy term “gluttony” into the essay—which is a mistake: the overweight and obese have a hard enough time losing weight. They should not have to suffer the judgments of those who suggest “that thinness signals self-discipline and self-respect, whereas fatness signals self-contempt and lack of resolve” (Worley).

Given a proposal that is otherwise so sensible, Critser doesn’t need to complicate matters by inviting moral judgments. He is at his most convincing when he makes a straightforward recommendation to change the behavior of children based on sound scientific research. Effective dietary strategies can be taught, and parents are the best teachers in this case as long as they realize that teaching restraint will be only one of several approaches and that judgments equating thinness with virtue should have no place in our efforts. We face a difficult challenge in meeting the growing problem of childhood obesity, and for the most part Greg Critser suggests a reasonable and workable place to begin.

Works Cited

EXERCISE 2.5

Informal Critique of Sample Essay

Before reading the discussion of this model critique, write your own informal response to the critique. What are its strengths and weaknesses? To what extent does the critique follow the general guidelines for writing critiques that we outlined on page 79? To the extent it varies from the guidelines, speculate on why. Jot down some ideas for a critique that take a different approach to Critser’s essay.

Discussion

• Paragraph 1 of the model critique introduces the selection to be reviewed, along with the author, and summarizes the author’s main claim.

• Paragraph 2 provides brief background information. It sets a context that explains why the topic of obesity is important. The paragraph ends with the writer’s thesis, offering qualified support for the proposal that parents should teach children to eat moderately.

• Paragraph 3 summarizes the argument of Critser’s editorial. Note that the topic sentence expresses approval of the editorial’s main (argumentative) thesis: Children should learn to eat in moderation.

• Paragraph 4 raises the first objection to Critser’s argument, that he misrepresents the complexity of obesity by discussing only behavioral causes and solutions. The paragraph expresses qualified support for his position, but suggests that other, nonbehavioral ways of viewing the problem and other, nonbehavioral solutions should be explored.

• Paragraph 5 raises a significant disagreement with Critser’s moralistic tone. The paragraph lays out the ways in which Critser is inappropriately judgmental.

• Paragraph 6, the conclusion, summarizes the overall position of the critique—to accept Critser’s basic recommendation that parents teach dietary restraint to children, but to reject the moral judgments that make obese people feel inadequate.