

Task: Write a critical review of Sherry Turkle's book *Alone Together: Why we expect more from technology and less from each other.*

Critical review task:

Sherry Turkle, a professor of the Social Studies of Technology, has written extensively about the effects of technology on human relationships. Read Chapter 1 (Connectivity and its discontents) from her book *Alone Together: Why we expect more from technology and less from each other.* What evidence does Turkle provide for her main argument that technology has served to diminish the quality of our relationships? How persuaded are you by this argument?

(1,000 words)



1. Have a look at the assignment question left
2. Now read the sample review. Read the accompanying comments on the side as you go. Is this a well written review in your opinion?

At the beginning of a review, you should provide all the BIBLIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION about the text you are reviewing.

Review: Turkle, Sherry (2011). *Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other.* New York: Basic Books (Extract from Chapter 1 - Connectivity and its discontents)

These opening sentences give some BACKGROUND to the text that is being reviewed. They introduce the general SUBJECT area covered in the text (the rise of digital communication), and also the main ISSUES being considered (Have these technologies improved our relationships?)

The last 20 years have seen a revolution in the way we communicate, all brought about by the quite extraordinary developments that have occurred in the field of information and communications technologies.. There is no doubt that the way people interact with each other nowadays – whether in business, education, in one's personal life – is drastically different from the way things were done in the not-so-distant pre-digital past. But have these developments been positive ones? Can we say that human relations have improved as a result of these changes? Sherry Turkle in her book *Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other* is quite sure that this is not the case.

At the end of this opening paragraph, the TEXT and its AUTHOR are introduced.

In her study, based on interviews with users of technology across a wide spectrum of society, Turkle argues that, while it may appear that people are more in touch with each other, the effect paradoxically of all this new communication is that people are becoming more socially alienated. "We are increasingly connected to each other", she states, "but oddly more alone: in intimacy, new solitudes" (p. 19). Turkle quotes many stories from her interviews to illustrate her basic argument. In one worrying case, she describes the experience of a woman who goes to interview someone she is interested in employing as a nanny. When the woman arrives at the apartment, she meets the person's flatmate who at the time is texting on her BlackBerry. The woman asks to see the would-be nanny. Rather than get up to knock on this person's door – which is only 15 feet away – the flatmate sends her a text to tell of the woman's arrival. The woman is shocked– as is Turkle – that the flatmate would not simply call out to her. The flatmate objects: "Oh no", she says. "I would never do that. That would be too intrusive" (p. 5). Part of the problem, according to Turkle, is that with the various devices we now use to communicate, we are able to control the contact we have with others, and in effect to diminish the intimacy of our relationships. We have many 'friends', but fewer genuine friendships, she argues.

Once the text has been introduced, the main task is to SUMMARISE its contents. The first thing you need to do is have a go at outlining the author's main ARGUMENT; that is, what is the main point they are seeking to make in the text.

Along with outlining the author's ARGUMENT, you should also indicate what type of EVIDENCE is presented in the text to support this ARGUMENT

Another major concern of the author is the way that communications technology has come to overwhelm our lives. Turkle points out that it used to be the case that we kept computers busy; now the relationships is reversed, and it is they that keep us busy. This is seen in the growing phenomenon of multitasking. Turkle quotes a number of examples of this – of a granddaughter who feels guilty for distractedly doing her emails while skyping with her sick grandmother; of participants at a conference being focused more on finessing their own upcoming presentations than paying attention to the speaker whose session they are in. All this relentless communication, Turkle suggests, has led to a perverse dependence on the technology: “whether or not our devices are in use, without them we feel disconnected, adrift” (p. 16).

This is a text mainly about ‘concerns’ that the author has about digital technology. The SUMMARY section of the review has been organised around this theme of “major concerns”. When you are writing your own summary of a text you will need to pay attention to how you will STRUCTURE your understanding of the text.

Turkle’s argument is an interesting and challenging one, and she manages to draw on numerous real life stories to vividly illustrate her points. Many of these stories are familiar ones, and capture well the frustrations and annoyances many of us can feel when confronted with some of the less impressive uses of digital communications. Another example she quotes is that of a brother who received the important, personal news of his sisters’ engagement (to be married) via an email to a list of friends. The brother explained in interview that this was surely news that should have been conveyed intimately in a face-to-face situation, or at least in a phone call. It is cases like these that drive home Turkle’s main point – that technology increasingly is reducing our relationships to mere connections: “We would rather text than talk”, she explains (p 17).

It is always helpful to bring in some DIRECT QUOTES from the text to support your summary. Note that you do not need to provide an (author, date) reference in a review, only the page no.

There are some problems however, with Turkle’s argument. One of these concerns the evidence she uses to support her case. As noted, the main data used in her study are interviews with people from various walks of life about their experiences of digital technology. We note however, that virtually all the stories recounted in the chapter are ones that illustrate some personally dissatisfying experience. One has the impression that Turkle is only interested in the negatives of the virtual world, and in this sense the study seems a biased one. Contrary to Turkle’s view on things, there is an emerging body of research that suggests that many people are not necessarily using the online world to supplant their face-to-face relationships, but instead using it to enhance and supplement these relationships (Pollet 2010).

This sentence signifies the shift from SUMMARISING the text, to providing some EVALUATION of it. You will notice that this initial EVALUATIVE comment is a positive one – “Turkle’s argument is interesting and challenging”.

Related to this problem of bias in her study are the limits of its scope. Turkle is a psychoanalyst, and so in her investigations she chooses to focus on the personal functions – and dysfunctions – of digital communications. This is an understandable emphasis. Her background however, prevents her from considering some of the more interesting social and political dimensions of the new technologies. The recent experiences in a number of countries, where social media have played a major role in challenging – if not overthrowing – repressive governments, suggest that far from bringing about disconnection between people, these technologies have the capacity to connect and unite people in ways not previously seen (Shirky 2008).

This sentence clearly indicates a shift to the NEGATIVE side of the students’ EVALUATION. Note that the first criticism concerns Turkle’s use of EVIDENCE. You will see that the rest of the review is organised around the various problems the student has identified in Turkle’s text.

A final shortcoming of the chapter is that it is hard to know where to go with Turkle’s argument. In expressing her concerns about the effects these technologies are having on our relationships, Turkle seems to wish that all these developments had never occurred. This is an unrealistic position. The new technologies are not going to go away – in fact, one assumes they will become more and more a part of our lives – and so it seems a slightly pointless exercise to outline all sorts of reason why life would be better without them.

When EVALUATING a text, it can be a good move to bring in the ideas of OTHER WRITERS to support the point you are making. This is often not a strict requirement, but does serve as evidence of your own wider reading on the topic. To refer to other works will always go down well with your lecturers. Another example of this use of OTHER SOURCES is seen at the end of the next paragraph.

In summary, while Turkle's book – at least the extract I read – is an interesting and lively account of life in the digital age, it does offer a fairly one-sided view of her subject, and fails to recognise the many benefits that digital culture has brought. One thought I had in writing this review, is that without these technologies, I would not have had such easy access to Turkle's book to read in the first place.

Words 1043

References

Pollet, TV, Roberts, SGB, Dunbar, R 2011, 'Use of Social Network Sites and Instant Messaging Does Not Lead to Increased Offline Social Network Size, or to Emotionally Close Relationships with Offline Network Members', *Cyberpsychology, Behaviour, and Social Networking*, vol. 00, pp. 1- 6, EBSCOhost, viewed 11 March 2011

Shirky, C 2008, *Here Comes Everybody: The Power of Organizing Without Organizations*. Penguin Press, New York.

In the CONCLUSION of your review, you need to summarise your overall response to the text. In this case, the response is overall a NEGATIVE one, although there is some acknowledgment of the text's POSITIVE features.

You will notice that more PERSONAL LANGUAGE is present here, with the use of "I" (first person pronoun). It is usually OK to use more PERSONAL LANGUAGE in review writing. This is because the chief purpose of a review is to express your own personal view of the text you have read. The conclusion is often a good place for some of these more personal reflections.

The REFERENCE section should include any additional sources you have referred to in the review. Note that you don't need to include an entry for the text you are reviewing – this is shown at the beginning of the review.

Note that the overall paragraph structure of this particular review is as follows:

1. Introduction
2. Summary – main idea 1
3. Summary – main idea 2
4. Evaluation – positive feature 1
5. Evaluation – negative feature 1
6. Evaluation – negative feature 2
7. Evaluation – negative feature 3
8. Conclusion

