



How to Write an Objective Evaluation

Reviews can be more than just a means of convincing people to do (or not do) the program you chose. When done correctly, a review can be a useful reflective exercise; a way of learning how to effectively articulate your experience; and can be used as a writing sample, showing that you are able to write with direction and clarity, and criticize constructively.

A reflective exercise

Reflection is the key to a good review, and it can be much more generally helpful. People probably asked you all the time when you got back how your trip was. Without time to properly reflect on your experience, the standard response of 'It was great! I had an amazing time!' often seems the easiest response, though it sometimes leaves a sense of sour insufficiency. It was so much more than great, or amazing, but how can you possibly put into words something that was so transformative?

Take some time to really think about your program. Try and determine a few things about life there that you found challenging, or that you miss, or that you wish you'd spent more time discovering. Once you get past the nostalgia, you may find some themes; explore those and you may find that while you miss the amazing bread in France, what you miss a bit more is the daily routine of going to the boulangerie and chatting with your baker. The simple knowledge that your bread was baked a few hours ago by someone you know and who can only be termed an artist, rather than hurriedly picked up from a shelf in a plastic bag and scanned through an automated checker can influence you to make adjustments to your life in the US to better reflect the lessons you learned abroad.

It is these little revelations that inform your experience and make study abroad more than just an extended vacation; and that is what people would be interested to hear about. We encourage you to download the worksheets below to help you isolate the themes from your time abroad as well as determine the skill sets you developed or refined during your international sojourn. Spend some time thinking back to the aspects of your program that were most enjoyable or most challenging and determine what you learned because of it. This will prove helpful not only in writing your program review, but also when speaking to grad school admissions officers or potential employers.

Articulate your experience

Once you've taken the time to reflect and have begun to isolate the more meaningful aspects of your experience, it's time to figure out how you're going to express them.

It's important to remember that your focus will change depending on your audience. When speaking with your professors, you would most likely highlight the differences in educational styles at your host



institution whereas while speaking with friends or family you would share more about your time outside of the classroom. Employers are most interested in the skills you acquired and how they make you the best fit for the position to which you are applying. Students reading the reviews will most benefit from your honest feedback. Think about the questions you had prior to going abroad about your location or program and see if there are ways you can address them in your review.

In all cases, your audience will appreciate a concise story and in the case of a potential employer, they always want to know how the information you are presenting will help them. Keep this in mind when selecting which moments from your time abroad to share.

Avoid “amazing”, “awesome” and dig deeper

You have a whole dictionary of adjectives you can use to describe your trip; try to use more than the same three over and over again! Dust off that thesaurus if you have to, and make your review different from all the other ‘incredible’ trips described. However, this goes further than simple word choice.

Many reviews you’ll see go something like this:

Prague was amazing!! I didn’t want to leave. I saw so many cool things and went to a different city every weekend. My classes were good, especially my history class. Overall it’s an incredible city and program and you should definitely go!

Prague is amazing, but that doesn’t really help a reader in deciding where to go... to the person who went, study abroad is pretty much always amazing. Assume your reader knows you had an awesome time and try to give one or two reasons why your particular program or location was so great.

Coming from a place where you need to get in a car and drive to do anything as simple as pick up a loaf of bread, it was incredibly liberating to be in a city like Prague. Once you’re in the center of the city it’s easy to walk anywhere, and whether you prefer buses, trams, the metro, or a combination of all three to get there, you’ll always be able to get where you want to go. Because the Czech Republic is so close to other cities in Europe (both Eastern and Western), we were always able to hop on a train for an easy day or weekend trip. The fact that I could take a class about Central European history and so easily visit the places we studied was invaluable to my understanding of history and my overall experience of the program.

Something as simple as the availability and ease of using public transportation – in the location, and for travel – can make an enormous difference in the efficacy of your review. If you traveled every weekend, talk about what impact that had on your overall experience. If you didn’t travel at all, talk about how well you got to know the hidden gems of your location. Mentioning particular classes that were interesting (and WHY they were so interesting) are also helpful, as many reviewers tend to forget that these are primarily academic programs. How did your academic program and travel tie in? Were there any memorable class trips that you couldn’t have done elsewhere?

If you’ve gone somewhere where the primary language isn’t English, mention the language and the impact it had on your trip; whether your proudest moment came in Paris when an impatient shop owner didn’t immediately switch to English when speaking to you, or your Argentinean host mother corrected



everything you said for *weeks* and then you noticed she'd stopped because she no longer needed to, or if you wish you'd learned more because you lived with Americans and studied with Americans and ate with Americans and so it wasn't much different from being in America... that is the information that prospective students want (and need) to hear!

Use as a writing sample

As mentioned before, this can be so much more than a review for you. If you take the time to write a useful, thought-provoking review or critique, that can work in your favor in the future. A review is a format which requires the author to be concise, articulate, and constructive in both praise and criticism; it is a brief piece which can showcase your command of evocative language, as well as provide an insight into your worldview. When prospective employers request a sample of your writing as part of an application, those skills are precisely what they are looking for you to demonstrate. Consider adding the website link of your review to your resume and LinkedIn profile so potential employers can appreciate your articulations.

Photo Choices

Some review sites allow you to upload photos from your program. As a reminder, it is in your best interest to select photos that capture your experience but are also work-appropriate. Potential employers don't want to see you celebrating with adult beverages or sun bathing on the Riviera. If in doubt, don't include the photo.

