

HOW TO WRITE A ONE-PAGE ARTICLE SUMMARY/CRITIQUE

Author, title, and year of article at top (make sure to spell the author's name correctly)

Name, course, and TA's name at top

Greg Downey

J 176 - TA Downey

Langdon Winner, "Who will we be in cyberspace?" (1996).

In this article from 1996 (before Google, before YouTube, before Facebook), philosopher of technology Langdon Winner argues that in terms of online information systems, "To invent a new technology requires that [...] society also invents the kinds of people who will use it [...]" (p. 46). He goes on to say that "If we limit our attention to powerful technical applications, their uses and market prospects, we tend to ignore what may be the single most consequential feature of technological change, the shaping of the conditions that affect people's sense of who they are and why they live together." (p. 46) In other words, Winner wants us to think about how online technology might affect us over the long term, and in unexpected ways, as both individuals and a society.

The effects that concern Winner the most seem to be political ones. Winner introduces the term "mythinformation" to point out the danger of holding the simplistic, utopian view that "the spread of information machines is somehow inherently democratic and that no one needs to lift a finger to achieve democratization and create a good society." (p. 47) In particular, Winner is worried that flashy consumer gadgets marketed to us to fill our needs as individuals mask profound social or collective consequences. This is a pattern he sees throughout the early 20th century, where "The modern world was to be a place in which personal desires would be fulfilled through the consumption of industrially produced commodities," but "Missing from the picture was any attention to collective goods and collective problems." (p. 50)

In the end, Winner wants us to avoid sleepwalking through periods of technological change — what he calls "technological somnambulism" (p. 53) — and instead make active choices about what technologies we use, and how we use them. This is a special responsibility for those in the information industries, working as creatives or engineers to build these new systems and insert them into workplaces, schools, and homes: "Persons whose professional work gives them insight into the choices that matter must be diligent in expressing their knowledge and judgements to a broad public." (p. 53)

I think Winner's argument is a persuasive one, and I like the way he uses a broad historical set of examples from the early 20th century to make his point about looming 21st century technological change. I wish he would say more about why "market forces" are not enough, by themselves, to indicate what kinds of technologies would be best for us to choose as a society of consumers. Is it because advertising is deceptive and the long-term consequences of technologies are hidden from us by the producers? Or is it because market behavior is by definition often short-term response to individual immediate needs and the ready availability of cash, rather than a question of careful, reasonable, long-term investment? Or perhaps he is concerned that the gadgets which allow us to work and play and consume in cyberspace become too easily wrapped up in a consumerist culture where we vie for status and appeal with our peers by owning the latest iPhone, Xbox, or Kindle. In other words, is Winner really concerned about technology in general, about information technology in particular, or about the basic limitations of capitalism?

When you use a quote, indicate what page it came from. Feel free to shorten quotes using the [...] technique.

Please use no larger than 12-point font size, and no larger than one-inch margins.

Please use single-spaced text, ragged on the right (unjustified).

Indent the first line of your paragraphs but don't leave a line between them.

Think about how you might repurpose these summary/critique papers on your group blog as you write them; it will make your work easier later.

Don't worry if you don't fill the whole page; get at least 3/4 of the way down the sheet of paper and you'll be fine.

First portion of your paper summarizes the main points of the article; don't worry about covering everything.

Try to identify some key terms that would be likely to appear on the exam

Second portion of your paper gives your own reaction, based on the author's arguments, evidence, and your own understanding of the topic