**Fair comment in academia:** Rapoport’s Rules for critically handling literature and reviewing articles

<https://medium.com/advice-and-help-in-authoring-a-phd-or-non-fiction/fair-comment-in-academia-4bb2be48090d>

One of the hardest things to get right in academic contexts is how to comment fairly on other people’s work. On the one hand, scientific and academic work legitimately demands that we should criticize what seems erroneous, perhaps especially if something is both wrong and likely none the less to be assigned plausibility. The price of staying silent may be to see a poor or misleading ‘meme’ further disseminated; or a faulty equation or index taken at face value; or a flawed method adopted by other researchers less alert to its flaws or limitations. The current[scale of retractions](http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/impactofsocialsciences/2011/12/19/impact-factor-citations-retractions/) of scientific papers shows that it is relevant to worry that wrong ideas left unexposed can still be influential.

On the other hand, academics and researchers put a lot of time and effort into preparing and publishing new work. So making criticisms needs to be handled carefully and appropriately, ensuring that they both need to be made and are legitimately motivated. It is important to be sure that criticisms are not caricaturing rival viewpoints, nor unconstructively belittling the hard work and honest effort that goes into almost all academic and serious research. [….]

[R]eading Daniel Dennet’s great book [Intuition Pumps and Other Tools for Thinking](http://www.amazon.co.uk/Intuition-Pumps-Other-Tools-Thinking-ebook/dp/B00BQ4NIFI/ref%3Dtmm_kin_title_0/275-2808036-8528360) I came across a short chapter (3) that seemed so well framed that I wished I had better followed this line of practice for myself.

**The centrepiece of Dennet’s argument is actually his remembered reconstruction of guidelines for commenting fairly and legitimately developed by the famous game theorist Anatole Rapoport, but never written down explicitly:**

**‘How to compose a successful critical commentary:**

**1. You should attempt to re-express your target’s position so clearly, vividly, and fairly that your target says, “Thanks, I wish I’d thought of putting it that way.”**

**2. You should list any points of agreement (especially if they are not matters of general or widespread agreement).**

**3. You should mention anything you have learned from your target.**

**4. Only then are you permitted to say so much as a word of rebuttal or criticism’.**

**Dennett concludes: ‘It is worth reminding yourself that a heroic attempt to find a defensible interpretation of an author, if it comes up empty, can be even more devastating than an angry hatchet job. I recommend it’.**