



Guidelines for Writing a Book Review

The main purpose of a book review is to evaluate and to analyse. It requires the writer to show their understandings and attitudes towards the author through valued reviews, descriptions, and interpretations. It requires that the writer identifies, summarises and, most importantly, evaluates the ideas and information the author has presented. A critical book review is not a book report or summary. Reports and summaries discuss content, while reviews evaluate the book's *strengths, weaknesses and validity through explanation, interpretation, and analysis*. Critical reviews can be positive or negative, based on your assessment of the book. In writing a review, you combine the skills of describing what is on the page, analysing how the book tried to achieve its purpose, and expressing your own responses.

You are asked to write book reviews in some of your courses to enable you to demonstrate that you can:

- understand the main points of an article or piece of work
- analyse the findings or argument of the article
- select appropriate criteria to evaluate the article
- provide a critical evaluation of the article based on the criteria you have chosen

The ability to read critically is not only important in academic study, it is also important in your wider life because critical abilities enable us to:

- keep up to date and adjust to change
- assess and comment on problems and proposed solutions others have published
- evaluate and comment on solutions that have been proposed

The following information provides some guidelines only. Books reviews can vary in a number of ways, including length, scope, intended audience, and complexity.

Basic Requirements

Simply stated, the reviewer must know two things in order to write a critical review:

1. *Knowledge of the work* demands not only an attempt to understand what the author's purpose is and how the component parts of the work contribute to that purpose, but also some knowledge of the author - his/her nationality, time period, other works etc.
2. *Knowledge of the genre* means understanding the art form and how it functions. Without such understanding, the reviewer has no historical or literary standard upon which to base his/her evaluation.

Establishing an Understanding of the Book

- Read the book carefully to first gain an overall idea of the writer's aims and main ideas (including the preface or introduction for statements about the book's intentions/limitations).
- Read the book a second time, considering the following questions as you go:
 - What is the author's viewpoint and purpose? What are the main points?
 - What kind of evidence does the author use to prove his/her points? Is the evidence convincing?
 - How is this book structured - is the development orderly and logical? How does it relate to other books on the same topic?
 - Does the author have the necessary expertise to write the book?
 - How successful do you think the author was in carrying out the overall purpose of the book? Was anything left out?
 - What is your final assessment of the book? Would you buy this book or recommend it to others?
- Note effective passages for quoting.
- Note your impressions as you read.
- Establish the thesis of your review. Think about what the main point of your criticism will be.

Writing the Book Review

❖ **Heading**

Most reviews start off with a heading that includes all the bibliographic information about the book. If your assignment does not specify which form you should use, you can use the following:

Title. Author. Place of publication: publisher, date of publication. Number of pages.

❖ Introduction

(The length of the introduction is generally approximately 10% of your total word count).

The opening paragraph, like the concluding one, is in a position of emphasis and usually sets the tone of the paper through allowing your readers to know what the review will say. Introductions can vary depending on the topic and the writer. Following are some of the various points you may want to include:

- an identification of the book by author and title, even though already stated in the heading.
- a brief description - not a summary - of the book's contents
- notification of the book's genre
- a statement of the author's purpose or audience
- a statement about the topicality of the work or its significance
- a comparison of the work to others by the same author or within the same genre
- an assessment of the author's authority/biases
- a comment of your response and evaluation of the strengths and weaknesses of the book

❖ Main Body

(The length of the main body is generally approximately 80% of your total word count).

The main body of the review should logically develop your thesis/main points as organised by your preparation and notes. The aim of your main body should be toward logical development of what you have decided is your the central point. How you build upon your ideas, and in what order is up to you, but here are some ideas to include:

- *Background information:* incorporate this into the earlier stages of your review to help place the book in context and, if necessary, further discuss the criteria for judging the book.
- *Summary:* spend some time summarising the main points of the book, including quotes and paraphrasing key phrases from the author. Quoted material should be put in quotation marks and properly footnoted or referenced (see *Footnotes, Bibliographies and Referencing Guidelines* for further information). If summarising a fictional book, be careful not to give away anything that would lessen the suspense for the readers i.e. give your readers a taste of the plot, but don't give away any surprises.
- *Response:* discuss what you agree and disagree with regarding the author's viewpoints or direction throughout the book.

- *Evaluation*: focus on your response to the book (eg. interesting, memorable, instructive etc) as well as whether you portrayed the author's style and opinions with a positive or negative attitude.

There is, of course, no set formula, but a general rule of thumb is that the first half to two-thirds of the review should summarise the author's main ideas and at least one-third should evaluate the book.

❖ **Conclusion**

Like other essays, book reviews usually end with a conclusion which ties together issues raised in the review and provides a concise comment on the book.

This paragraph may sum up or restate your main points or thesis, or may make the final judgement regarding the book. No new information or ideas should be introduced in the conclusion.

Steps in Revising the Review

1. Allow some time to elapse, at least a day, before starting your revision.
2. Check your bibliographic heading has all the correct information.
3. Correct all mistakes in grammar and punctuation as you find them.
4. Read your paper through again looking for unity, organisation and logical development.
5. If necessary, do not hesitate to make major revisions in your draft. If a sentence or paragraph seems awkward or unclear, you should try to rewrite it - rewriting is what separates good writing from bad.
6. Make sure you are not repeating yourself (which can be easy when trying to emphasise something!).
7. Verify quotations for accuracy and check the format and content of references.

Various Sources for Reviewing - Some Considerations & Tips

★Fiction

Character

1. From what sources are the characters drawn?
2. What is the author's attitude toward his characters?
3. Are the characters flat or three dimensional?
4. Does character development occur?
5. Is character delineation direct or indirect?

Theme

1. What is/are the major theme(s)?
2. How are they revealed and developed?
3. Is the theme traditional and familiar, or new and original?
4. Is the theme didactic, psychological, social, entertaining, escapist, etc. in purpose or intent?

Plot

1. How are the various elements of plot (eg, introduction, suspense, climax, conclusion) handled?
2. What is the relationship of plot to character delineation?
3. To what extent, and how, is accident employed as a complicating and/or resolving force?
4. What are the elements of mystery and suspense?
5. What other devices of plot complication and resolution are employed?
6. Is there a sub-plot and how is it related to the main plot?
7. Is the plot primary or secondary to some of the other essential elements of the story (character, setting, style, etc.)?

Style

1. What are the "intellectual qualities" of the writing (e.g., simplicity, clarity)?
2. What are the "emotional qualities" of the writing (e.g., humour, wit, satire)?
3. What are the "aesthetic qualities" of the writing (e.g., harmony, rhythm)?
4. What stylistic devices are employed (e.g., symbolism, motifs, parody, allegory)?
5. How effective is dialogue?

Setting

1. What is the setting and does it play a significant role in the work?
2. Is a sense of atmosphere evoked, and how?
3. What scenic effects are used and how important and effective are they?
4. Does the setting influence or impinge on the characters and/or plot?

***Biography**

1. Does the book give a "full-length" picture of the subject?
2. What phases of the subject's life receive the greatest treatment and is this treatment justified?
3. What is the point of view of the author?
4. How is the subject matter organized: chronologically, retrospectively, etc.?
5. Is the treatment superficial or does the author show extensive study into the subject's life?

6. What source materials were used in the preparation of the biography?
7. Is the work documented?
8. Does the author attempt to get at the subject's hidden motives?
9. What important new facts about the subject's life are revealed in the book?
10. What is the relationship of the subject's career to contemporary history?
11. How does the biography compare with others about the same person?
12. How does it compare with other works by the same author?

★History

1. With what particular period does the book deal?
2. How thorough is the treatment?
3. What were the sources used?
4. Is the account given in broad outline or in detail?
5. Is the style that of reportorial writing, or is there an effort at interpretive writing?
6. What is the point of view or thesis of the author?
7. Is the treatment superficial or profound?
8. For what group is the book intended (textbook, popular, scholarly, etc.)?
9. What part does biographical writing play in the book?
10. Is social history or political history emphasized?
11. Are dates used extensively, and if so, are they used intelligently?
12. Is the book a revision? How does it compare with earlier editions?
13. Are maps, illustrations, charts, etc. used and how are these to be evaluated?

★Poetry

1. Is this a work of power, originality, individuality?
2. What kind of poetry is under review (epic, lyrical, elegiac, etc.)?
3. What poetical devices have been used (rhyme, rhythm, figures of speech, imagery, etc.), and to what effect?
4. What is the central concern of the poem and is it effectively expressed?

The following references have been used in the compilation of this booklet:

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