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How to Write a Book Review

A book review is a description, critical analysis, and an evaluation on the quality, meaning, and significance of a book, not a retelling. It should focus on the book's purpose, content, and authority. A critical book review is not a book report or a summary. It is a reaction paper in which strengths and weaknesses of the material are analyzed. It should include a statement of what the author has tried to do, evaluates how well (in the opinion of the reviewer) the author has succeeded, and presents evidence to support this evaluation.

There is no right way to write a book review. Book reviews are highly personal and reflect the opinions of the reviewer. A review can be as short as 50-100 words, or as long as 1500 words, depending on the purpose of the review.

The following are standard procedures for writing book reviews; they are suggestions, not formulae that must be used.

1. Write a statement giving essential information about the book: title, author, first copyright date, type of book, general subject matter, special features (maps, color plates, etc.), price and ISBN.
2. State the author's purpose in writing the book. Sometimes authors state their purpose in the preface or the first chapter. When they do not, you may arrive at an understanding of the book's purpose by asking yourself these questions:
 - a. Why did the author write on this subject rather than on some other subject?
 - b. From what point of view is the work written?
 - c. Was the author trying to give information, to explain something technical, to convince the reader of a belief's validity by dramatizing it in action?
 - d. What is the general field or genre, and how does the book fit into it? (Use outside sources to familiarize yourself with the field, if necessary.) Knowledge of the genre means understanding the art form and how it functions.
 - e. Who is the intended audience?
 - f. What is the author's style? Is it formal or informal? Evaluate the quality of the writing style by using some of the following

standards: coherence, clarity, originality, forcefulness, correct use of technical words, conciseness, fullness of development, fluidity. Does it suit the intended audience?

g. Scan the Table of Contents, it can help understand how the book is organized and will aid in determining the author's main ideas and how they are developed - chronologically, topically, etc.

g. How did the book affect you? Were any previous ideas you had on the subject changed, abandoned, or reinforced due to this book? How is the book related to your own course or personal agenda? What personal experiences you've had relate to the subject?

h. How well has the book achieved its goal?

i. Would you recommend this book or article to others? Why?

3. State the theme and the thesis of the book.

a. **Theme:** The theme is the subject or topic. It is not necessarily the title, and it is usually not expressed in a complete sentence. It expresses a specific phase of the general subject matter.

b. **Thesis:** The thesis is an author's generalization about the theme, the author's beliefs about something important, the book's philosophical conclusion, or the proposition the author means to prove. Express it without metaphor or other figurative language, in one declarative sentence.

Example

Title: We Had it Made

General Subject Matter: Religious Intolerance

Theme: The effects of religious intolerance on a small town

Thesis: Religious intolerance, a sickness of individuals, contaminates an entire social group

4. Explain the method of development-the way the author supports the thesis. Illustrate your remarks with specific references and quotations. In general, authors tend to use the following methods, exclusively or in combination.

a. **Description:** The author presents word-pictures of scenes and events by giving specific details that appeal to the five senses, or to the reader's imagination. Description presents background and setting. Its primary purpose is to help the reader realize, through as many sensuous details as possible, the way things (and people) are, in the episodes being described.

b. **Narration:** The author tells the story of a series of events, usually presented in chronological order. In a novel however, chronological order may be violated for the sake of the plot. The emphasis in narration, in both fiction and non-fiction, is on the events. Narration tells what has happened. Its primary purpose is to tell a story.

c. **Exposition:** The author uses explanation and analysis to present a subject or to clarify an idea. Exposition presents the

facts about a subject or an issue as clearly and impartially as possible. Its primary purpose is to explain.

d. **Argument:** The author uses the techniques of persuasion to establish the truth of a statement or to convince the reader of its falsity. The purpose is to persuade the reader to believe something and perhaps to act on that belief. Argument takes sides on an issue. Its primary purpose is to convince.

5. Evaluate the book for interest, accuracy, objectivity, importance, thoroughness, and usefulness to its intended audience. Show whether the author's main arguments are true. Respond to the author's opinions. What do you agree or disagree with? And why? Illustrate whether or not any conclusions drawn are derived logically from the evidence. Explore issues the book raises. What possibilities does the book suggest? What has the author omitted or what problems were left unsolved? What specific points are not convincing? Compare it with other books on similar subjects or other books by the same as well as different authors. Is it only a reworking of earlier books; a refutation of previous positions? Have newly uncovered sources justified a new approach by the author? Comment on parts of particular interest, and point out anything that seems to give the book literary merit. Relate the book to larger issues.

6. Try to find further information about the author - reputation, qualifications, influences, biographical, etc. - any information that is relevant to the book being reviewed and that would help to establish the author's authority. Can you discern any connections between the author's philosophy, life experience and the reviewed book?

7. If relevant, make note of the book's format - layout, binding, typography, etc. Are there maps, illustrations? Do they aid understanding?

8. Check the back matter. Is the index accurate? Check any end notes or footnotes as you read from chapter to chapter. Do they provide important additional information? Do they clarify or extend points made in the body of the text? Check any bibliography the author may provide. What kinds of sources, primary or secondary, appear in the bibliography? How does the author make use of them? Make note of important omissions.

9. Summarize (briefly), analyze, and comment on the book's content. State your general conclusions. Pay particular attention to the author's concluding chapter. Is the summary convincing? List the principal topics, and briefly summarize the author's ideas about these topics, main points, and conclusions. Use specific references and quotations to support your statements. If your thesis has been well argued, the conclusion should follow naturally. It can include a final assessment or simply restate your thesis. Do not introduce new material at this point.

Some Considerations When Reviewing specific genres:

Fiction (above all, do not give away the story)

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 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 and other Nonfiction

1. With what particular subject or 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?

Subject headings used in the catalog:

Book reviewing

Criticism

Related books:

Book reviewing : a guide to writing book reviews for newspapers, magazines, radio, and television. Boston. The Writer, 1978 PN98.B7 B6
Drewry, John. Writing Book Reviews. Boston: The Writer, 1974. PN98.B7 D7 1974
Teitelbaum, Harry. How to Write Book Reports. New York: Monarch Press, 1975. LB2369 .T4
Miller, Walter James. How to write book reports : -- analyzing and evaluating fiction, drama, poetry, and non-fiction New York. Arco Pub., 1984. LB2369 .M46 1984

Sources of Book Reviews

Book Review Digest 1985+ INDEX Z1219 .C96
Book Review Index 1965+ INDEX Z1035.A1 B6
Contemporary Authors REFERENCE Z1224 .C5

Related Websites:

[How to Write a Book Review.](http://library.queensu.ca/inforef/bookreview/wri.htm) Stauffer Library. <http://library.queensu.ca/inforef/bookreview/wri.htm>
[Writing Book Reviews.](http://library.uwaterloo.ca/libguides/1-12.html) University of Waterloo Library. <http://library.uwaterloo.ca/libguides/1-12.html>
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