

Book Reviews



Writing a book review requires analytical thinking. It is your opportunity to give readers an evaluation of a book's value and show how the author did or did not achieve a purpose. You will also show readers why the book matters. Here are some techniques for writing book reviews.

Approaches to Book Reviewing

- **Descriptive**

A descriptive review is one in which the writer, without over-enthusiasm or exaggeration, gives the essential information about a book. This is done by description and exposition, by stating the perceived aims and purposes of the author, and by quoting striking passages from the text.

- **Critical**

A critical review is an extension of the descriptive. In addition to telling what the book is about, the review must also analyze the value of the book. The critical reviewer asserts a judgment of the book's worth and defends that judgment using critical reading skills and perspectives gained from other readings and class discussions.

Minimum Essentials of a Book Review

- **Description of ideas expressed in the book**

Rather than a summary of how the book is structured or "what happens" in a book, offer a description of the main ideas and the purpose of the author.

- **Information about the author that is relevant to the review**

Avoid a full biography, but include details that inform us of the author's perspective on the topic.

- **Analysis of the author's purpose**

This includes a statement of your understanding of the author's purpose; how well you feel the author's purpose has been achieved; and evidence to support your judgment of the author's achievement.

Preparation

- Read the book with care.
- Note effective passages for quoting.
- Note your impressions as you read.
- Allow yourself time to assimilate what you have read.
- Allow yourself time to think about the book in a larger context.
- To prepare to write a good book review, you should examine the preface or forward and any other information that indicates the book's purpose and general context. As you read, take notes on your own reactions to the author's ideas.

Preparation (continued)

- After finishing the book, clarify your thoughts by asking yourself:
 - What seems to be the author's main purpose or point?
 - Is this purpose aimed at a particular group of readers?
 - What information does the book convey?
 - What personal or practical meaning does it have for me?
 - With what context (historical, theoretical) should the book be evaluated?
- Your thesis should answer the question: how successful was the author in his or her purpose?

Structure

- **The bibliographic entry**

At the top of your first page provide the following information: Author. Title. Place of publication: Publisher, date of publication. Number of pages.

- **Introduction**

The opening paragraph, like the concluding one, is in a position of emphasis and usually sets the tone of the paper. The focus of the introduction will reflect the assignment. If the review is descriptive, the opening will state the thesis, the purpose of the book and how the author makes his or her point. In a critical review, the introduction will also include a thesis statement that argues whether or not the author has succeeded in his or her purpose.

- **Summary**

The second part of your review should objectively describe the book's main ideas and the information it includes. You should mostly paraphrase, though a couple of good quotations might reveal the flavor of the contents. It is important to keep your ideas separate from those of the author.

- **Evaluation**

The thesis or main point of your review should express your estimate of the book's worth and whether or not the author has made an argument worth paying attention to. This does not mean simply an opinion that the book is "good" or "bad." Instead, try to imagine what readers of your review—for example, other students in your class—might want to know about the book. They will want to know whether or not the book will interest them, or will be useful to them, or will give them reliable information. They may also want to know if the book is likely to be useful and readable for a long time. You may want to tell readers if the book is a complete study of the subject or if it treats the subject in a fragmentary way. The book may be organized well or poorly; its argument may be well-supported and thoughtful or obvious and incomplete. Your thesis should consider these values of the book. Then, your evaluation must explain your opinion by referring to particular examples from the book itself and from other sources (i.e., course material, outside texts, theoretical debates).