

WRITING A BOOK REVIEW

A critical book review is a thoughtful discussion of a text's contents, strengths, and limitations. A book review should reflect your capacity to read critically and to evaluate an author's arguments and evidence. Compose your review as you would any essay, with an argument supported by evidence, and a clear, logical structure.

Initial Steps

1. Read the book carefully, taking notes on material that you think may be relevant or quotable and on your impressions of the author's ideas and arguments.
2. Determine the author's principal argument, the chief themes of the text, the kinds of evidence used, and the way in which the author uses them.

Organizing the Review

1. All reviews begin with bibliographic information: the author's name, the book's full title, place of publication, publisher, edition, date, pagination, and cost, if known.
2. In no more than two paragraphs, introduce the book. Give your initial appraisal of the work, including your key observation on the text. This key observation will be your thesis. Try not to begin with a flat statement such as "This book is interesting." Begin with an anecdote, a challenging quotation, or a key observation.
3. Follow with descriptive analysis and evaluation of the text. You may either treat these topics separately, first describing the book's contents, the author's argument, presentation, and evidence, and then offering your own evaluation, or you may weave the two together. In either case,
 - a. clearly set out the author's purpose in writing the book, and whether or not you think the author has succeeded.
 - b. describe the author's arguments and the themes of the book, and give your appraisal of their validity and effectiveness.
 - c. describe the sources and evidence the author uses to prove his case, and evaluate their appropriateness and sufficiency. What are the author's sources? Should the author have used more, or different, sources?
 - d. Comment on the author's organization and writing style.
4. Conclude. Here you may make more general remarks about the text and the ideas presented in it. If you have not already done so, indicate whether you feel the book is worthwhile, and for what audience. Is the book outstanding? Will it make a lasting contribution to its field, or is it less satisfactory?

Questions to Consider

Although you should not use the following questions as some sort of laundry list of "things to include" (dull for us all), you may wish to consider them as you prepare and write your review.

Analysis of content

1. What is the author's principal argument? What are her/his conclusions?
2. What does the author choose to emphasize?

3. Does the author's presentation contradict or refute alternative interpretations?
4. What methods of analysis does the author employ?
5. What sorts of evidence does the author employ?
6. Who is the author? Is he/she qualified to write this work?
7. When was the work written? How relevant is it today?

Evaluation of content

8. Is the book convincing in style and substance? Why or why not?
9. Does the author accomplish her/his purpose?
10. Is the author fair to his/her subjects, or is the author overly biased? Is the book accurate or misleading?
11. Does the author describe but not analyze?
12. Does the author treat all available data equally well?
13. Are all arguments in the book equally well supported? Is the book marred by generalizations or speculations?
14. Is the author's use of evidence adequate and convincing?
15. Does the author omit possible alternative interpretations? Is the author's approach flexible, or is it dogmatic?
16. Is the book well-organized? Are all parts of the book equally well reasoned and developed?
17. Is the book well written, or is it in some way repetitive, obscure, or confusing?
18. To whom would the book appeal? What audience did the author intend?

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