

ACADEMIC SKILLS CENTRE (ASC)



Writing Academic Reviews

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What Is A Review?

Reviews come in various shapes and sizes and are written about many different things: books, films, television programs, musical performances, even restaurants. In one way, however, reviews are similar: their purpose. They all aim to describe and evaluate what is being reviewed. Usually, reviews support these evaluations with an analysis or interpretation of the reviewed item, and they also show how a particular performance, film, or book etc. fits into the broader category of like performances, films or books. In other words, a review will frequently say what kind of contribution a movie or painting, for example, makes to cinema or to art or to society in general. A short film review from *Maclean's* follows. Read it looking for where and how its author describes, evaluates, and positions this film and its star. To help you, words that suggest a judgement or evaluation have been underlined and words that seem to place this film in the wider world and show its significance are in bold.

A 100-Channel Psycho:

Jim Carrey's Mayhem Gets a Disturbing Edge

The Cable Guy Directed by Ben Stiller

It looks like a prime example of Hollywood hubris. Produced by the team that made *Waterworld*, this is the movie for which Canadian superstar Jim Carrey became the first actor to receive a \$20-million (U.S.) paycheque. But to his credit, Carrey responds to the pressure by going further out on a limb than ever before. After the crowd-pleasing antics of *Dumb and Dumber* and his *Ace Ventura* movies, *The Cable Guy* marks an adventurous departure. Sure, in the title role he plays another in-your-face, over-the-top, wild and crazy guy. But for once, he is not a lovable goof.

He is a rather unsavory psychotic. And the movie itself is not pure farce: It is satire, with a disturbing edge.

Serving as Carrey's straight man, the terminally boyish Matthew Broderick plays Steven, who has just broken up with his girlfriend and moved into a new apartment. Nervously, he offers the cable installer a bribe for free pay channels. And that begins a nightmarish co-dependency. The pathologically lonely Cable Guy has no friends, just preferred customers. He wants Steven to be his best friend *immediately* — and soon becomes the buddy from hell.

Carrey performs the whole movie with a deadpan lisp. Although it is more a speech impediment than an affectation, it injects a weirdly gay subtext into the Cable Guy's needy craving that is never explicitly addressed. But then, Carrey's whole style is a kind of outrageous camp. And he indulges his genius for manic caricature in a number of set pieces, including a medieval times jousting tournament, some sadistic basketball playing — and a priceless karaoke version of the Jefferson Airplane's *Somebody to Love*, which Carrey sings with a banshee vibrato that sounds like Grace Slick on acid. Sulphuric acid.

Unlike Carrey's previous vehicles, however, the movie has some ideas. The Cable Guy is an orphan of the television age, a neglected child who has grown up with the idiot box as his foster parent. And for him, like America itself, the scanning lines between TV and reality have become insanely blurred. The movie also alludes to the sinister implications of the information superhighway: the deal with the Cable Guy is just a fibre-optic upgrade of the classic Faustian pact with the devil.

Filming against a landscape of constant channel-surf, Ben Stiller — who made *Reality Bites* and starred in the recent hit *Flirting with Disaster* — directs with a playful wit. Carrey's jugular-

grabbing style sometimes seems at odds with Stiller's sly direction, and the haywire plot patches in and out of Hollywood formula. Still, this is the first Jim Carrey comedy for grown-ups. In fact, without a single toilet joke, *The Cable Guy* may disappoint fans of *Dumb and Dumber*. It shows Carrey acting smart and smarter — as if a Woody Allen is peeking out from behind the Jerry Lewis mask, eager to nail the neuroses of his generation.

At university, you will most likely be asked to write reviews of films, books, or articles and to model these reviews on ones published in scholarly journals. Even among these reviews, however, there is a great deal of variety. There is the short book review, sometimes called a *capsule review*, which is usually less than five hundred words long and which focuses mainly on giving readers who have not read the reviewed book a general sense of its content and value.

The full-fledged scholarly review is longer. Its purpose is to **summarize, analyze, evaluate, and place within a field of scholarship** whatever is being reviewed. Often, the audience of the *scholarly review* has read the book or seen the film. Even if this is not the case, the audience will probably have some background in the discipline and some knowledge of the subject. Consequently, the *scholarly review* is less a précis or summary and more a critical evaluation or commentary. In fact, this type of review is sometimes called a *critique*, a *critical analysis* or a *critical review*. Whatever it is called, the scholarly review tells an educated audience of the significance of a text or film within the context of a discipline, field of study, or particular subject or course.

Looking at the reviews published in various magazines, newspapers, and scholarly journals will give you a good idea of the differing audiences and forms of the review. It is particularly important, however, to examine reviews written for scholarly journals in your discipline, as this will show you what a review looks like and should do in each field. Ask a librarian to help you look for review journals in your discipline or for reviews of a specific book.

You can find current book reviews using the same library tools that you use to find any other type of academic source. You can browse through current copies of journals in your discipline, either in print or online, and look at recent reviews. You can also use library indexes, such as Web of Knowledge or Ebsco, to search for book reviews on a particular topic. Using the advanced search option, choose “book review” as your preferred document type to limit your search to only reviews.

Why Do Professors Assign Reviews?

Professors assign reviews, in part, because they recognize the important role reviews play in scholarship. Look in almost any academic journal and you will find reviews. In fact, if you look at lists of faculty publications, you will see that many of the items listed are reviews. Reviews give scholars the opportunity to respond to one another’s research, ideas, interpretations — to one another’s scholarship. Reviews are a staple of academic writing, the means by which scholars comment on each other’s work and enter into conversation with each other.

Tip: If you want an up-to-date, insider’s view of a particular subject or discipline, read the reviews published in current scholarly journals devoted to that subject or discipline.

To become a participant in your field you need to know how to write reviews, one of the reasons professors get you to practise writing them. Professors also assign reviews so students will develop some important skills. One such skill is **critical reading**. To review a book or article effectively, you need to become a careful and insightful reader. Critical reading skills, then, are necessary for students and scholars

alike; both need to comprehend and respond to scholarly discourse taking place in print.

Writing reviews also helps develop **analytical and interpretive skills**. What message did the film or book convey? How did the director or author convey that message? Through what scenes, language, arguments, camera angles? Reviewers must be able to analyze, or break apart, a text or film, so as to see how its parts create a whole, and they must also be able to convey a particular vision of that whole and of its parts.

Another key academic skill is **evaluation**, and reviews necessitate evaluation. Is this film an accurate depiction of life in Nigeria according to what I know about this subject from my course on development and social change in Africa? Is the argument in that book complete? Correct? Convincing? What about the method used in this experiment? Is it appropriate? Valid? Is the research sample size large enough to support the conclusions? Evaluation is a complex process and will be investigated in the section entitled “Towards a Book Review” on page 9.

Professors also assign reviews to encourage each student to **relate the ideas of others to the themes of a subject, course, or discipline, and to his or her own thinking**. The good review connects. In what way does this book contribute to scholarship? How does that film broaden my understanding of socialization? Which of the attitudes to technology that we studied in class does this short story illuminate? When a review is a university assignment, the reviewer not only connects with the text or the film, but also shows how it connects to what is being studied in class.

So when you are asked to write a review at university, you are being asked to do the following:

- describe or summarize something

- analyze and interpret it
- evaluate it
- relate it to scholarship or to the themes of a course or subject.

What A Review Is Not

A review is not a research paper

Some students, instead of writing about a book or a film when they are asked to write a review, write a research paper on the subject of the book or film. Don't be among them! If you are supposed to review the book *In Retrospect: The Tragedy and Lessons of Vietnam* by Robert McNamara, **your subject is this book, not the Vietnam War.**

A review is not a summary

Yes, it is important to summarize the contents and significance of whatever you review. But at university, the review is more than a description or summary. The review is an evaluation, a critical analysis, a commentary.

A review is not a book

Don't make the mistake of re-telling the book or film in your own words. You don't have the time or space, and this approach doesn't allow you to express your interpretation or evaluation. Remember, in an academic setting, your audience could very well have read the book or seen the film, so what is wanted is not a detailed description but the communication of your own critical analysis and judgement.

A review is not a book report

A book report does give a fairly detailed description of the contents of a book. It may also provide background information about the book: who wrote it, when it was published, or how popular it was, for example. Although a book review also provides description and background information, it does more. A review analyzes, interprets, and evaluates.

A review is not an off-the-cuff, unfair personal response

Of course writing a review involves communicating your personal view of something. General, flip statements that don't express your understanding of what you have read or seen are next to useless, however. "I thought the book was interesting." "The movie was boring." These comments are not sufficient. Why was the book interesting? Did it reveal some new data? Was the director trying to produce a boring movie to realistically depict life in the 1950s? Also, a reviewer, to be effective, must be fair and accurate. So work hard to see clearly what is actually in front of you when your first reaction to the tone, argument, or subject of what you are reviewing is extremely negative or positive.

A review is not a string of quotations

Although quotations from a text or from the dialogue of a film may be useful, they do not explain your thinking or judgements. So use quotations sparingly. By the way, quotations from other reviews are not a good idea: you are supposed to be writing the review, not compiling other reviewers' opinions.



Towards A Book Review

Okay,” I hear you saying, “so now I know what a review is and what it isn’t, BUT I STILL DON’T KNOW HOW TO WRITE ONE!” That’s what this section considers. We are going to focus on writing a book review here because this is the sort of review students are most typically asked to produce at university.

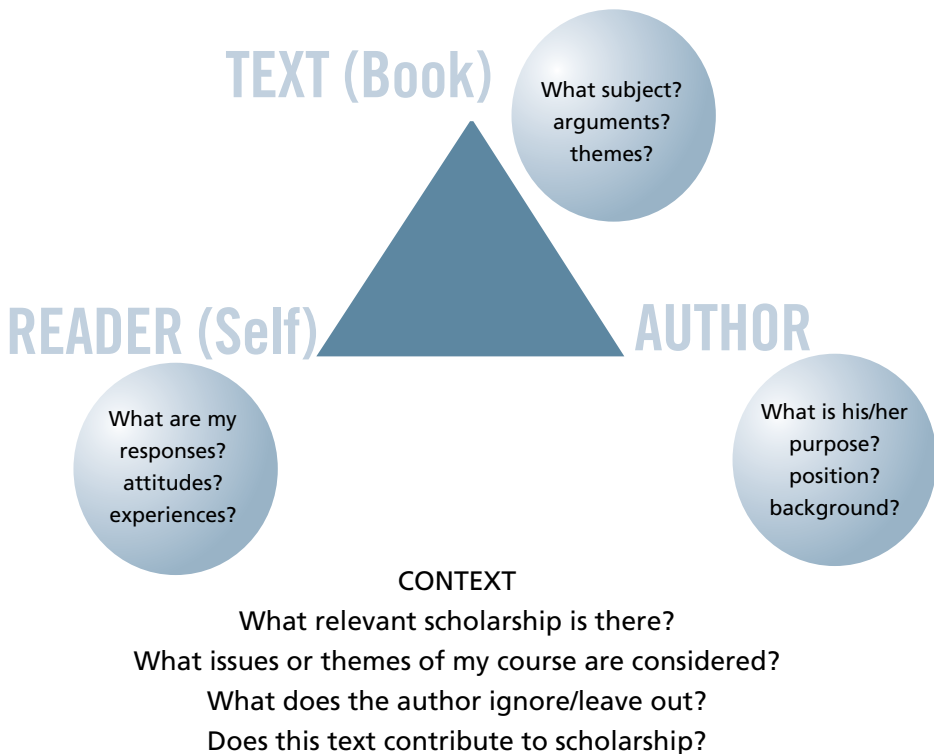
As with writing anything, there is more than one way to proceed. You will, however, have to do certain things:

- read the book critically;
- make notes about the book and about your responses to it;
- find what you want to write about, in the main, by examining and summarizing or categorizing your notes;
- write a coherent, well-organized review developing your main points.

Let’s take this one step at a time.

Reading critically

Being critical does not mean criticizing. It means asking questions and formulating answers. So critical reading is not reading with a “bad attitude.” Critical readers do not reject a text or take a negative approach to it; they inquire about a text, an author, themselves, and the context surrounding all three. The following diagram will help you understand the elements involved in critical reading.



This triangle of text, reader, and author interacting within a certain context frames the questions a good critical reader asks. These questions will help you, the reviewer, understand a book on its own terms (analyze it); bring your own knowledge to bear on a book (respond to it); critique the text considering validity, truth, and slant (evaluate it); and place the text in context (compare it to other texts).

Seeing the text

It is extremely important to work toward seeing a clear and accurate picture of a book. One approach to accurate seeing is to try to suspend your judgement for a while, focusing instead on describing or outlining a text. A student once described this as listening to the author's voice rather than to her own. Here are some questions that will help you analyze a text of non-fiction or fiction:

1. What is the book about? What is its subject? What of the book's content do you think you should describe in this review?
2. What is the thesis, main theme, or main point?
3. What major claims or conclusions does the author make? What issues does the book illuminate? What attitude to life does it present?
4. What is the structure of the book? What comes first, second, third? How does the author build her/his argument or plot?
5. What sources does the author consult? What evidence is used to support claims? Which sorts of sources predominate? Do these sources in any way "predetermine" certain conclusions? In a novel, what kind of language, descriptions, or sections of plot alert you to the themes and significance of the book?
6. Is there any claim for which the evidence presented is insufficient or slight? Do any conclusions rest on evidence that may be atypical? Which sections of the novel ring true? Which don't? Why?
7. How is the argument developed? How do the claims relate? How does the novel proceed? What does the conclusion reveal when compared with the beginning?

Two strategies are useful for seeing the text. One is *pre-reading*, and the other is making a *reverse outline*.

Pre-reading

Pre-reading helps a reader to see a book as a whole. Too often, readers skip the acknowledgments, preface, and table of contents of a book, starting reading at chapter one or the introduction. By doing this, they miss all sorts of information about the book's purpose and direction:

What's going to happen in the third chapter, or in the conclusion? They won't know until they get there. Just thinking carefully about a book's title and the title of its chapters can give you lots of information.

Pre-reading steps

1. Read the title.
2. Read the introduction and the preface (if reading a book) or the introductory paragraph(s) (if reading an article).
3. Examine carefully the table of contents and the index of a book; read the section headings of an article.
4. If there are illustrations, tables, charts, or graphs, look at them and read their captions.
5. Skim through the work looking for the main ideas. In books, you may quickly read the introductory and summary paragraphs of each chapter; in articles, quickly read topic sentences of each paragraph, which are most frequently at a paragraph's beginning. Pay particular attention to chapters and paragraphs that have a summarizing or transitional function.
6. Read the concluding chapter of a book or the final paragraph(s) of an article.

After pre-reading, pause for a moment's thoughtful review of what you have discovered. It is often useful to jot down an outline of the main subjects and arguments presented in the text and of your first thoughts concerning both.

The reverse outline

A reverse outline helps a reader analyze the content and argument of a work of non-fiction. What you do is read each section of a text

carefully (chapter or section of a chapter when outlining a book and paragraph when outlining an article) and write down two things: its main point or idea and its function in the text. A simpler way of putting this is that you write down what each section says and what it does. To see examples of reverse outlines, consult pages 21 to 37.

Exercise: Select a review from a journal in your discipline, and do a reverse outline of it. What does this tell you about a review's structure?

Thinking about the author

Of course, you can often tell a lot about an author by examining a text closely. Sometimes, however, it helps to do a little extra research. Try to find out what else the author has written, if anything, by looking up his or her name in indexes, major libraries' catalogues or by Googling the name. (If you don't know what these things are, consult a librarian.) There are even references, such as *Contemporary Authors* or *The Dictionary of Literary Biography*, which publish biographical articles on writers. Here are some questions about the author that would be useful to keep in mind when you are reading a text critically:

1. Who is the author?
2. What does the author do? What has she/he done? What experiences of the author's might influence the writing of this book?
3. What else has the author written?
4. What is the author's main purpose or goal for the text? Why did he/she write it? What does she/he want it to achieve?
5. Does the author indicate what contribution she/he thinks the text makes to scholarship or literature? What does the author say about his/her point of view or method of approaching the subject? In other words, what position does the author claim?

Thinking about yourself

Because you are doing the interpreting and evaluating of a text, it is important to examine your own perspective, assumptions, and knowledge in relation to the text. One way to do this is by writing a position statement that outlines your view of the subject of the book or article you are reviewing. What do you know, believe, or assume about this subject? What in your life might influence your approach to this text? Often, however, students find it hard either to pinpoint their thinking on a subject or to respond to a text. “Who am I,” one asked, “to judge the work of a published expert in the field?” Well, as a student in a discipline, you are certainly acquainted with a body of scholarship, even though you may not be an expert. So here are some prompts that might help you generate a personal response to a book:

I agree that ... because ...

What puzzles me is ...

This reminds me of ...

I’m surprised by ...

I disagree that ... because ...

I don’t understand ...

I wonder ...

What if ...?

Another way to examine your thoughts in relation to a text is to note down what pops into your mind when you are first reading it. Which parts made you go to sleep? When did you pay attention? When did you feel depressed, hopeful, angry, enthusiastic? Why? Basically, note how you experienced the book, and then analyze the reasons for this experience. Here are some questions a reviewer might do well to consider:

1. What do I know about the subject of this book?
2. What beliefs, experiences, and assumptions of mine would influence the way I perceive this text? How?
3. What did I feel when I read this book? Why?
4. How did I experience the style or tone of the author? How would I characterize each?

5. What questions would I ask this author if I could?
6. For me, what are the three or more best things about this book? The three or more worst things? Why?

Considering context

Surrounding a text is a context. That context may include a widely acclaimed piece of scholarship to which this book responds. It may include a particular personal motive for writing: I need to document this injustice, ingratiate myself with this leading expert. Or perhaps the context is simply contemporary society or today's headlines. Whatever the case, a reviewer needs to examine a text's context to arrive at a fair understanding and evaluation of its contents and importance. Here are some useful questions:

1. What are the connections between this text and others on similar subjects? How does it relate to my course? To scholarship? To my discipline?
2. What is the scholarly or social significance of this book? What contribution does it make to our understanding?
3. What, of relevance, is missing from the book? Certain kinds of evidence or methods of analysis/development? A particular theoretical approach? The experiences of certain groups?
4. What other perspectives or conclusions are possible?

Taking notes

You are right. We have already talked about taking notes. The reverse outline is a useful way to note the subject matter and argument or plot of a book. And writing down what you are thinking and feeling when

you read (by using some of the prompts already provided) is an excellent method of noting your responses to a text. So much for describing the process of creating a review one step at a time!

Another notetaking method is helpful in the production of a review: the double-entry notebook.

The double-entry notebook

In its simplest form, the double-entry notebook separates a page into two columns. In one column, you make observations about the text; you take notes that will help you analyze and describe it. In the other, you note your responses to the text. This notetaking method has two advantages. It forces you to make both sorts of notes — notes about the text and notes about your reaction to the text — and it helps you to distinguish between the two. A diagram of the sort of information that a reviewer might include in a double-entry notebook follows. On page 17 is an example of a portion of a double-entry notebook which notes a reader’s observations about and responses to the review of *The Cable Guy* printed on pages 1-3 of this booklet.

Observations

Reader’s notes on the text
Information
thesis
claims
evidence
method
research sample
focus
plot
themes
ideas

Responses

Reader’s notes on response to text
based on reader’s knowledge of
the world,
the topic,
the discipline
associations/connections based on
discourse conventions, e.g.,
logic or validity of argument
“truth” of premises
sufficiency of cause/evidence
resonance of fiction

Note that this diagram shows only the sort of information that could go in each column; here, there is no connection between these two columns, as there would be in a true double-entry notebook.

Whatever method of notetaking you choose, do take notes, even if these are scribbles in the margin. If you don't, you might rely too heavily on the words, argument, or order of what you are reviewing when you come to write your review.

Organizing notes

The temptation is to let the original order of your notes, which usually follows the order of the text or film, dictate the structure of your review. This sometimes works because, of course, fiction, non-fiction, and films have a certain coherence and a beginning, middle, and end. Consequently, your review might also happen upon a coherent order.

Double-entry notebook: B.D. Johnson's review of *The Cable Guy*

*Seems to claim that Carrey's character is: isolated from human affection
"orphaned"
"neglected"*

Is the reviewer implying that technology isolates and helps confuse people about what is real?

But I wouldn't count on it. It's best to take control of your review by deciding what to emphasize and what to put where. You want to describe and analyze certain aspects of what you are reviewing; what is important to you might not be important to the author or filmmaker. Besides, you are writing this commentary; you are not reproducing what you are reviewing.

Another related danger lies in answering the questions you developed or were given (in this book or by your professor) in the order in which you thought of them or they happened to be listed. These questions

are designed to help you generate a critical analysis, an understanding and evaluation of the item to be reviewed; most often, they shouldn't determine the order of points in your review.

So organizing your notes is a really important part of becoming an author of a review. How do you do this? Well, first examine them, and develop rough categories from this examination. You may have two categories of notes, initially: observation notes and response notes. But within these two categories you will be able to discover many more. To determine these categories, compare notes. Which are about a similar theme? Which are strikingly different? You may decide, for example, to divide your response notes into two major categories: positive and negative. After doing this, look at all the notes in these two categories, and try to characterize or describe your responses: what, in the main, did you like or not like?

You go through this process of organizing and categorizing to see what you really want to write about. Your observation notes should yield a general idea of what you think of the nature and place of the work, and your response notes should let you see how you react to it and also give you specific points of criticism. Once you know what you mainly want to say, you order your review to introduce, develop, and support that main thing.

Structural Guidelines

Although, as said previously, the best order is the order that allows you to express your ideas logically and coherently, there are some general structural guidelines that you might want to follow when writing a review, especially if you are not familiar with this form of writing. But remember, these are guidelines, not a rigid formula. And you will find, as you read more and more reviews, that many of them do not follow the structure outlined here.

I. Introduction

Do exactly what you would do if you were standing in front of an audience: introduce what you will review, the author, and the points you intend to make about this work.

- give relevant bibliographic information;
- give the reader a clear idea of the nature, scope, and significance of the work;
- indicate your evaluation of the work in a clear 1-2 sentence thesis statement.

Provide background information to help your readers understand the importance of the work or the reasons for your appraisal. Some examples follow:

- explain why the issue examined is of current interest;
- tell what scholarship says about this subject;
- describe the author's perspective, methodology, purpose;
- give information concerning the circumstances under which the book or film was created.

Tip: Try to get your reader's attention in the introduction by using what journalists call a hook, an interesting and relevant quotation, story, example, statistic, or statement.

II. Summary

Summarize the contents very briefly:

- focus on the main points and purposes of the work;
- focus also on the ideas, themes, or arguments that you will evaluate or discuss later.

Tip: Keep it short! A paragraph or two should be sufficient.

III. Analysis/Evaluation

Analyze and explain the significance of the main points of the work. Evaluate the work, answering questions such as the following:

- does the work do what its author claimed it would?
- leaving out your points of agreement or disagreement, is the work valid and accurate?
- what are your reasons for agreeing, disagreeing, liking, disliking, believing, disbelieving?

IV. Conclusion/Recommendation

Give your overall assessment of the work. Drive home your chief point. Explain the larger significance of your assessment.

On the pages that follow you will find three sample reviews, one each from the humanities, social sciences, and environmental sciences. Read each one carefully, along with the accompanying reverse outline and commentary, and observe the ways in which each review is constructed. While they are all a little different, they are good models of the function of a review and of the choices you have when writing one. A helpful summary of the review-writing process can be found on the following page.

Writing The Review: Process Summary

1. Read or view carefully the item to be reviewed
 - usually more than one reading/viewing
2. Make notes about the item and your responses
 - use appropriate notetaking methods
3. Discover what you want to write about, in the main, by examining, categorizing, and summarizing your notes
4. Engage in pre-writing activities like brainstorming, organizing points and notes, and outlining
5. Write a draft developing your main points
6. Revise your draft to produce a coherent, well-organized review

The reverse outlines for the sample reviews that follow will offer comments after each paragraph in the review.

Sample Review: Humanities

Unveiling a Parallel: a Romance

by Alice Ilgenfritz Jones and Ella Merchant (Two Women of the West)

Introduced by Carol A. Kolmerten. Utopianism and
Communitarianism Series.

Edited by Lyman Tower Sargent and Gregory Claeys.
Syracuse University Press (800-365-8929), 1991. xlv + 158.
\$29.95 cloth, \$12.95 paper.

A review by Veronica Hollinger
Trent University, Peterborough

Unveiling a Parallel, first published in 1893 and out of print since 1894, is a “lost” feminist utopian novel written by two women from Cedar Rapids, Iowa. Carol Kolmerten’s informal and informative introduction gives the reader some background on the lives of Alice Ilgenfritz Jones and Ella Merchant and usefully situates their novel within the traditions both of the sentimental novel and of late nineteenth-century American utopian fiction such as Edward Bellamy’s *Looking Backward*. As Kolmerten notes, over two hundred utopian novels appeared between 1888 and 1918, “the largest single body of utopian writing in history” (xxiv).

Reverse Outline. Paragraph One: Introduction

Says: *Unveiling a Parallel is a feminist utopian novel in the sentimental tradition and a part of the largest single body of utopian writing in history, which was published between 1888 and 1918.*

Does: *Introduces the title and author of the text to be reviewed. Gives background information concerning the authors (when they lived and where) and text (when it was published and who wrote the introduction). Situates the text within contemporary literary scholarship (feminist utopian novel part of wave of utopian fiction 1888-1918).*

Note: *Background information regarding a text and its authors can often help a reviewer situate the text within a body of scholarship.*

The parallel which Jones and Merchant unveil is a double one: at the same time as they develop the similarities between America in the nineteenth century and the civilizations on Mars visited by their aeronautically-inclined young male narrator, they also argue for the basic similarities between male and female natures which would become apparent once women attained the rights and privileges traditionally enjoyed by men alone.

Paragraph Two. Summary of Main Points

Says: *Jones and Merchant are showing what they think of America in the 19th century (by making the civilizations on Mars similar) and are demonstrating that they think the nature of men and women is basically the same.*

Does: *Gives reviewer's interpretation of the authors' main points and purposes.*

The structural similarities to Charlotte Perkins Gilman's more familiar feminist-utopian novel, *Herland* (1915), are obvious: as in *Herland*, the narrator is a young male explorer who encounters a new world and a new world order, and whose naive questions and reactions provide the excuse for various of its inhabitants to explain this new world's social systems and values to him and to the reader. The fact that the narrator is a quite conservative young man who is convinced that the patriarchal and capitalist way of American life is the epitome of human development paves the way, as it does in *Herland*, for nice touches of humor and satire.

Paragraph Three. Summary of Content

Says: *The book is similar to Herland in structure: a young male explorer convinced that his capitalist and patriarchal society is the epitome of human development learns of the social systems and values of a new world.*

Does: *Describes the structure of Unveiling a Parallel by comparing it to the classic Herland.*

The differences between *Unveiling a Parallel* and *Herland* are also significant, however. Perhaps most interesting is the fact, also noted by Kolmerten, that Jones and Merchant do not end their novel with the ritual of heterosexual marriage to which even Gilman, in spite of the fact that *Herland* is a separatist utopia, gives lip service. Although

their narrator does indeed find the woman of his dreams on Mars, the novel ends with his return to Earth — alone

Paragraph Four. Summary of Content / Evaluation

Says: *Unveiling a Parallel is different than Herland in that it doesn't end with the narrator's heterosexual marriage.*

Does: *Suggests the significance of the text by showing how its ending is less conventional than Herland's.*

It is also interesting that Jones and Merchant construct no less than two utopian societies, Thursia and Caskia, on their imaginary Mars, each of which provides their narrator with an object of romance. Thursia, whose drawbacks only gradually become apparent, is a society much like their own late nineteenth-century America, although richer and more elegant. Here the narrator meets and is attracted to Elodia, a young woman who is successful in business, a power in the community, the mother of an illegitimate child who does not live with her, an experienced lover, and a leader in her social circle. Elodia is everything that successful young men in the “real” world would like to be, no worse and certainly no better: she drinks too much and is also addicted to a potentially harmful drug. Naturally, the narrator, convinced of the essential passivity and purity of female nature, soon becomes disgusted with her, especially as she makes absolutely no effort to change her own life to fit his expectations.

Paragraph Five. Analysis Of Text

Says: *In Thursia, which is a wealthier and more refined version of American 19th-century society, the narrator is attracted to and then repulsed by Elodia, a woman who is the epitome of a successful young man of the authors' time.*

Does: *Conveys the reviewer's interpretation and analysis of the plot, characters, and settings of this portion of the text.*

Note: *The plot is not retold here; the focus is on the elements of plot and on the characteristics of the society and of Elodia that the reviewer thinks significant for her evaluation of the text.*

Elodia is perhaps Jones and Merchant's most interesting and sophisticated creation in *Unveiling a Parallel*, the embodiment of the woman who enjoys traditional male privileges and is as unlike an angel in the house as it is possible to be. Their narrator's visit to Thursia provides the authors with some fine opportunities to satirize the nineteenth century's burdensome idealization of women.

Paragraph Six. Evaluation Of Text

Says: *Elodia is an interesting and sophisticated character who allows her creators to satirize the 19th century's idealization of women.*

Does: *Evaluates the character of Elodia and makes a judgement about the nature of the text (it is, in part, satirical).*

When the narrator moves on to Caskia, the truly utopian society in the novel, the story loses much of its sparkle and takes on a more conventional tone. It is in Caskia that he meets Ariadne, the woman to whom he gives his final allegiance. Caskia is a society which lives by the principle of universal love and, as such, is clearly Jones and Merchant's ideal community, just as Ariadne is their ideal woman, embodying as she does many of the virtues attributed to the feminine principle at the end of the nineteenth century. In Caskia, however, this is no drawback, since the entire society has espoused these virtues. Suffice it to say that it is Elodia whom the contemporary reader is likely to remember, and Elodia who will probably strike that reader as the more truly human of the two women.

Paragraph Seven. Analysis/Evaluation

Says: *In Caskia, a more conventional utopian society founded on the principle of universal love, the narrator falls in love with Ariadne, the embodiment of feminine virtue as it was understood in the late 19th century and a less human character to the modern reader.*

Does: *Conveys the reviewer's interpretation of plot, characters, setting, and suggests the typical response of a modern reader. Evaluates Ariadne by comparing her to Elodia.*

Jones and Merchant are not particularly sophisticated writers, and it is unlikely that *Unveiling a Parallel* will displace *Herland* from its position as the classic early feminist utopia. Nevertheless, it has its own charms, and serves to remind us of the many twists and turns on the road to women's social equality. One hundred years after its first publication, the vast majority of North American women are still far from achieving even the less than completely desirable success enjoyed by Elodia in Thursia. The realm of universal peace and love represented by Caskia seems as out of reach as it ever was.

Paragraph Eight. Evaluation Of Text as a Whole

Says: *Although *Unveiling a Parallel* is charming and useful for showing how far women still have to go on the road to social equality and how far humanity is from living in a world of universal peace and love, it will not replace *Herland* as the classic feminist utopian novel because Jones and Merchant are not sophisticated writers.*

Does: *Evaluates the text as a whole by telling what it is good for and why *Herland* is better literature.*

Sample Review: Social Sciences

Politics without Principle:

Sovereignty, Ethics and the Narratives of the Gulf War

by David Campbell. Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 1993, pp.vii, 120.

A review by Mark Neufeld

Trent University, Peterborough

With the collapse of the Soviet bloc, international relations scholars have begun casting about for new themes to take the place of East-West Conflict. For better or worse, that of “Ethics and International Affairs” seems destined to become one of those themes.

Reverse Outline. Paragraph One: Introduction

Says: *Ethics and international affairs is a new theme among international relations scholars, replacing that of East-West conflict.*

Does: *Introduces the current state of the discipline.*

Note: *The first paragraph here mentions neither the text nor the author.*

Hence the significance for the wider discipline of David Campbell’s engagement with sovereignty and ethics in relation to the Gulf War. Taking as his point of departure Foucault’s notion that “war is the narration of politics/the political by other means” (3), Campbell draws upon postmodern “discourse analysis” to analyze the discursive practices that moved the crisis toward conflict — in particular, the “discourse of moral certitude” through which the West attributed all responsibility for the war to Iraq.

Paragraph Two. Introduction / Summary of Text's Purpose

Says: Campbell's book looks at sovereignty and ethics in the Gulf War using Foucault's theories and postmodern discourse analysis to investigate the "discourse of moral certitude" by which the West attributed responsibility for the war to Iraq.

Does: Introduces the author and subject of the text. Gives a summary of the author's main purpose and of his method. Positions the text in the field of scholarship.

What is arguably most significant is Campbell's attempt in the final chapter of the book to "articulate an ethico-political disposition that is both consonant with the complexities of the postmodern world and capable of encouraging us to resist undemocratic practices" (91). The elements of the ethico-political disposition Campbell promotes are as follows. First, it is necessary to recognize that the notion of the "Autonomous subject" cannot be sustained; that subjects are constituted intersubjectively — that is, "by their relationship with the Other" (92). Following from this is the recasting of the notion of ethics from efforts to derive objectively-valid generalizable rules of social behaviour to a recognition and acceptance of "heteronomous responsibility" (93).

Paragraph Three. Analysis / Evaluation

Says: A significant contribution of Campbell's is his attempt to construct a way of acting that is both consonant with the complexities of the postmodern world and resistant to undemocratic practices; he argues that two things are necessary — throwing out the notion of the autonomous subject and accepting that of heteronomous responsibility.

Does: Evaluates the significance of the text's purpose. Presents an analysis and interpretation of the most significant argument of the text.

The significance of such a shift in the view of the subject and of ethics, argues Campbell, is the way it would alter standard practices in international politics. Were such a view of the subject and ethics to be embraced in foreign policy, for example, the result would be a “greater appreciation for ambiguity and a sensitivity to contingency,” the result of which would be that “the adversarial of the unexpected [would] not become an occasion for moral absolutism and violent retribution akin to the dark days of the Cold War” (94). In the face of growing interdependence, such a disposition counsels “humility rather than hubris,” and engagement with the world that “seeks to affirm life,” and, as a consequence, “might offer the prospect of an improved quality of life for many” (96-97).

Paragraph Four. Analysis of Argument

Says: Campbell argues that shifting our notion of the subject and of ethics would result in an appreciation for ambiguity, a sensitivity to contingency, a movement away from meeting the unexpected or unknown with moral absolutism, and a humility that would affirm life and offer the prospect of improving its quality.

Does: Analyzes what the reviewer considers to be one of Campbell’s main arguments.

Note: This reviewer zeroes in on arguments of significance to him very quickly.

Campbell’s intervention is to be welcomed, particularly given his efforts to elucidate a life-affirming ethics. Still, there are two basic problems that pose themselves in light of his arguments. The first of these is Campbell’s representation of his “alternative” formulation to modernist theorizing. Campbell is surely right in saying that within the modernist metaphysical tradition (and the conventional international relations literature it informs) subjectivity is often understood as autonomous agency, and ethics as a set of objectively grounded “rules of conduct or

the moral code that undergirds, through various commands, the path to the good and just life” (91). Yet, as theorists such as Charles Taylor would remind us, it is not necessary to abandon modernist theorizing to encounter the recognition of the “relational character of subjectivity” or the conception of ethics as context-dependent reflection on deeply contrastable ways of being in the world.

Paragraph Five. Analysis/Evaluation of Argument

Says: Although Campbell is right in saying that modernist traditions often understand subjectivity as autonomous agency and ethics as a set of objectively grounded rules, he is wrong to suppose that modernist theory does not allow for a relational subjectivity or a notion of context-dependent ethics; nevertheless, Campbell’s work is welcome.

Does: Evaluates the argument by presenting the reviewer’s analysis of modern metaphysical tradition, which is different than Campbell’s. Evaluates Campbell’s effort.

Note: Often, effective criticism originates because of a difference between the reviewer’s and the author’s understanding of the concepts upon which an argument is based — because of different assumptions, definitions, or experiences.

The second problem is that Campbell gives no hint of how political structures and power relations — domestically and globally — would have to change for a view of ethics as “heteronomous responsibility” to become the guiding framework for policy-making. Nor does Campbell suggest which social forces might lead in the struggle to effect those far-reaching changes.

Paragraph Six. Evaluation

Says: *Campbell shows neither how political structures and power relations must change to make the ethics of “heteronomous responsibility” practical nor what social forces might enable these changes.*

Does: *Evaluates Campbell’s argument by showing what is left out.*

Note: *What an author doesn’t include is frequently as important as what he or she does.*

That Campbell does not address these issues is, in a certain sense, understandable. Identifying and establishing political arrangements that encourage ethical reflection constitute the very ethos of the Enlightenment and modernity. Still, these are questions that would seem unavoidable. Accordingly, it is not at all clear how postmodern IR theorists such as Campbell will avoid being drawn back into some version of modern social and political theory if they pursue an “engagement with the world” that “seeks to affirm life” to its logical conclusion.

Paragraph Seven. Evaluation

Says: *Perhaps Campbell avoids these issues because they would draw him back into modernist theory, and, if this is the case, perhaps his goal and that of other postmodern IR theorists is not attainable.*

Does: *Evaluates Campbell’s effort by suggesting an irony: perhaps postmodern theory is not the vehicle to take Campbell where he wants to go.*

Note: *Here the reviewer broadens his scope, a useful way to conclude because it shows the importance of this text and of this piece of criticism.*

Sample Review: Environmental Science

Beyond Interdependence:

The Meshing of the World's Economy and the Earth's Ecology

By Jim MacNeill, Peter Winsemius, and Taizo Yakushiji

New York: Oxford University Press, 1991, pp. xx, 159. \$24.95

Global Environmental Politics: Dilemmas in World Politics

By Gareth Porter and Janet Welsh Brown

Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1991, pp. xv, 208.

\$43.50. Paperbound \$10.95

A review by Robert Paehlke
Trent University, Peterborough

Environmental issues are very much on the agenda of international politics despite the present disinclinations of some prominent international leaders. The two books reviewed here convey the broad range of those issues and discuss the numerous international institutions and agreements that have been established to deal with them. Both books provide an extended list of acronyms for these institutions and agreements, Porter and Brown's list running to three pages. It would seem that almost no major international organization has avoided a significant involvement in environmental matters. More than that, a whole array of organizations has been created to address what finally now commands some of the attention it deserves.

Reverse Outline.

Note: Differences in structure between this review and the others originate, in part, from the fact that this review considers two texts. See how the reviewer introduces first the broad field of scholarship into which both texts fit — environmental issues and international politics. Then, he turns to the subjects, characteristics, and main themes of

both books, giving readers an idea of how he will assess these texts. After this, each book is considered on its own.

Paragraph One. Introduction

Says: Both books discuss environmental issues, which are receiving more of the international attention they deserve, and both describe the international institutions and agreements dealing with these issues.

Does: Introduces the main subject of both books. Places those subjects in the context of current affairs to show their significance.

Note: This reviewer moves from the general subject (environmental issues and the agenda of international politics) to the more specific subjects of the two books (international environmental issues and the institutions and agreements established to deal with them). This movement from general to specific is frequent in introductory paragraphs.

The authors of these two books are in general agreement on the main themes. The planet as a whole now faces a wide variety of problems that can be effectively resolved only if addressed internationally and collectively. These issues include global warming, depletion of the ozone layer, the destruction of tropical forests and the variety of human threats to bio-diversity, acid precipitation, desertification, and human overpopulation. *Beyond Interdependence* is, essentially, a well-argued update of *Our Common Future*, the report of the Brundtland Commission, and *Global Environmental Politics* is a well-written introductory textbook on the conduct of environmental politics in the international arena.

Paragraph Two. Summary of Main Themes And Arguments

Says: *The authors of both books agree that environmental issues, such as those named, must be addressed internationally and collectively.*

Does: *Introduces the main arguments and characteristics of both books.*

MacNeill, Winsemius, and Yakushiji's central theme is captured in their title. The world, they argue, is no longer merely economically interdependent. We are also ecologically interdependent, and the global economy and ecology are inextricably linked as well. The desperate economic situation of the poorer nations currently leaves them little choice but to put bio-diversity at risk. But economic growth in its traditional forms and patterns is not a solution. As the authors put it,

Since 1900, the world's population has multiplied more than three times. Its economy has grown twentyfold. The consumption of fossil fuels has grown by a factor of 30, and industrial production by a factor of 50. Most of that growth, about four-fifths of it, [has] occurred since 1950. Much of it is unsustainable. (p.3)

Paragraph Three. Summary of Main Argument

Says: *Beyond Interdependence argues that we are economically and ecologically interdependent and that traditional economic growth damages the environment.*

Does: *Summarizes the main argument of Beyond Interdependence.*

Beyond Interdependence convincingly makes the case that the interdependence of the world's economy and Earth's ecology will alter both our patterns of governance and the underlying logic of economic decision making. Indeed, we must fundamentally change economic incentive patterns such that all nations cease the overexploitation of resource stocks (soils, forests, fisheries, species, and waters) and global life support systems (especially the atmosphere and climate). Here the book is at its best. It demonstrates how some nations contribute to ecological decline out of poverty, others out of wealth. It also outlines one of the root causes of these problems: misdirected governmental subsidies that accelerate the overexploitation of forests, waters, and energy. The case made for change regarding these and other destructive policies is beautifully articulated. A less explicit and detailed case for curbing human population growth is also clearly stated, to the authors' credit.

Paragraph Three. Analysis / Evaluation

Says: *Beyond Interdependence* convincingly and articulately argues that political and economic decision-making must alter, especially by changing economic incentive patterns to eliminate the root causes of ecological decline, which the book outlines.

Does: Continues the analysis of the main argument of *Beyond Interdependence* and evaluates the text's significance.

Note: Consider the way this reviewer groups and names environmental factors. "Resource stocks" is the name used for a category which includes soils, forests, fisheries, species, and water; and "global life support systems" is the name for the group that includes the atmosphere and climate. Categorizing and naming the categories you have created is an important part of summarizing, and, consequently, of reviewing.

Global Environmental Politics is much more a guide to international environmental organizations and what they have done in recent years. It also carefully examines a wide variety of international environmental issues from the unsuccessful attempt to ban whaling to the 1991 Gulf War. The latter is considered in relation to a rethinking of many national security issues as environmental security issues. The range of particular issues covered is most impressive and includes conservation issues such as the ivory trade, resource issues such as tropical timber, and health issues such as the international trade in toxic wastes. Contemporary international relations undergraduates can get a very up-to-date look at the new environmental dimension of modern diplomacy. As Porter and Brown note, environmental issues are no longer regarded as “low politics — a set of minor issues to be relegated to technical experts.”

Paragraph Four. Summary / Evaluation

Says: *Global Environmental Politics is a good guide for undergraduates. It covers international environmental organizations, agreements, and issues, which include environmental security issues, conservation issues, and resource issues.*

Does: *Gives a summary of the main themes and purposes of Global Environmental Politics. Tells what this text is good for.*

Both of these books are surprisingly and admirably tough-minded. All of the authors are experienced hands in international and governmental circles. Both books accept that profound economic and political changes are implicit in the many environmental problems we now must confront collectively on a global scale. Neither steers away from addressing controversial questions with perhaps one exception. Neither book is quite prepared to argue that we in the industrialized nations must be prepared to do with less, be it less than we have now or merely less than we might otherwise have. Is it not possible that the long-term global future now requires such a perspective?

Paragraph Five. Evaluation

Says: *Both books are written by experts and confront controversial issues head on, except for the question of whether industrialized nations must make do with less.*

Does: *Assesses both texts.*





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