



## How to Write a Book Review

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### What is a Book Review?

An academic book review is a formal paper that works to describe, analyze, and evaluate a particular source as well as to provide detailed evidence to support this analysis and evaluation. Further, a review often explains how the book compares to other works on similar topics or illuminates the contribution the book makes to our understanding of a historical topic.

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### What is the Difference Between a Book Review and a Book Report?

It is essential to distinguish between a university-level book *review* assignment and a book *report* assignment that you may have completed in high school. Book reports tend to focus on *summarizing* the work that you read; your goal is to explain what it says and show that you read the book with care. In contrast, a book review asks you to *analyze* a book; your goal is to identify the key arguments of the book and how the author supports these arguments as well as to evaluate the book's strengths and weaknesses.

This evaluation of strengths and weaknesses is central to another key difference between book reviews and book reports. Book reports often ask you to provide a personal opinion as to whether or not you liked a book. A book review asks you to move beyond your personal likes or dislikes and provide a reasoned argument as to the merits or problems contained in the book. In a book review, it is not enough to say that a particular book was "bad" or "excellent." You need to provide detailed analysis as to what factors, such as scope, theoretical perspective, or use of evidence made it so.

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### Preparing to Write a Book Review

#### Reading Critically

As with other essays, the steps toward writing an effective book review begin well before you turn on your computer and begin to type. Successful book reviews depend on a careful and critical reading of your book. Module 2 contains excellent suggestions on how to read critically, and it may be helpful to review these insights as you begin your book review assignment.

As you read, make sure to take notes on the book. Taking notes, especially when they are in your own words, helps to put distance between you and the book and thus to avoid simply regurgitating its details in your review. It will also help you to see patterns within the book and thus work toward a thesis.

As you read, make sure to consider the following questions:

- What is the central question or issue that the book is addressing?
- What is the book's argument or thesis?
- How is the book organized to support this thesis? How are the chapters ordered? Chronologically? Thematically?

### **Making an Evaluation**

As mentioned earlier, in order to write a successful book review, you will need to move beyond summary to evaluate the book. Many students find it difficult to make such an evaluation. After all, the author has considerable expertise and training; it is natural to feel daunted by critiquing his or her work.

It is important to distinguish between simply criticizing a work and analyzing and thinking critically about it. Thinking critically does not mean that you have to disagree with a work. It means that you need to analyze it and consider it in a reasoned manner. Your review should present an evaluation of what the book's key arguments are, how effectively they are presented and supported, and how they help or fail to help readers to understand a given topic.

As you read the book and review your notes on it, consider the following questions:

- How and what does this work help us to understand about a time period or issue?
- What types of evidence does the author draw on to support his or her argument?
- Does the book do what the author claims that it will do?
- Are there other types of evidence that the author fails to acknowledge or ignores?
- What theoretical perspective does the author work from? How does this shape or affect his/her argument?
- How is this book similar to or different from other books on the topic? Why are they similar or different?
- Are you convinced by the book? Why or why not?

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### Structure of a Book Review

#### **I. Introduction**

An introduction to a book review is generally short and direct. However, it must provide two key elements: *background* and *thesis*.

**Background:** First, your introduction should identify the book and author under review along with any essential historical or historiographical background: What time period and region are discussed? What is the historical question or topic that the book addresses?

**Thesis:** Somewhere in your introduction (generally toward the end) you must provide a succinct, clear evaluation of the book. This evaluation is the thesis for your book review. Your thesis should encompass three main components:

- What the main argument of the book is.
- Your evaluation of the book such as its strengths and contributions or weaknesses and shortcomings.
- Why and/or in what ways you think the work demonstrates these strengths and weaknesses.

As you will see from the examples below, there are many different ways to write a thesis for a book review. However, all of the thesis statements have the three qualities mentioned above. *Please note that the authors mentioned below are fictitious.*

- **Example A:** In her work, Jones successfully argues that slave women in the American South had a different experience than did male slaves, an experience that opened up some unique freedoms for women but also created gender-specific hardships; while her book is well supported through her creative use of slave narratives and provides a crucial examination of a little-studied group, her failure to acknowledge the importance of religion to slave culture leads her to miss a crucial area of gender difference within the slave experience.

- **Example B:** Smith argues that Indigenous peoples during the nineteenth century faced insurmountable cultural and physical losses through both warfare and assimilationist practices. His argument is supported with detailed evidence. However, his work fails to recognize the limited agency that Indigenous peoples maintained throughout their experience and thus does not illustrate how Indigenous people met the challenges of their new surroundings; ultimately, the book does not explain the cultural continuity that some Indigenous peoples were able to maintain.
- **Example C:** Mankad argues that the Black Death affected cities far more than it did the countryside; while one might question whether his work ignores the secondary effects of the Black Death on rural populations, his innovative use of artistic and literary sources makes his argument convincing and a significant contribution to a field that has been dominated by demographic and statistical evidence.

## II. Summary of Key Arguments

After your introduction, you should generally provide a brief summary or overview of the book. Take great care not to simply repeat or mirror everything in the book. Step back and identify what its essential arguments are and briefly summarize them. You may want to comment on:

- What is the book's thesis? How is it similar to or different from other historians' work on a similar topic?
- How is it organized? What are the major arguments?
- What types of evidence are presented?

## III. Evaluation/Analysis

This section should constitute the bulk of your review. In it, you need to explain and develop the evaluation made in your thesis. *Make sure to use examples and quotations (if your professor allows quotations) from the book to illustrate and prove your assessment of the work.* For example, if your thesis argues that the work provides a careful and detailed examination of a topic, you should point toward places in the book where it does so. Similarly, if you argue that the work fails to recognize a particular perspective, give examples of places in the text that you think would have benefited from attention to that perspective.

## IV. Conclusion

Your conclusion should provide a succinct summation of your review. Overall, what does this work contribute to its field? What limitations does it possess? Does it suggest interesting avenues for future research? How does your analysis of the book help readers to understand the time period being studied or how historians have understood that period?

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## Common Problems in Book Reviews

Book reviews are a different form of writing than other types of essays, and writing successful reviews takes time, preparation, and practice. Below we list some of the common problems that bedevil students as they write their first book reviews.

- **Summarizing rather than analyzing a work.** Some students are so concerned about summarizing everything that the book says that they fail to provide analysis and evaluation. Try to step back and see the big picture of the work. Only discuss its main arguments and supporting evidence.
- **Writing a research paper rather than a book review.** Some students forget that their goal is to review how the author of a particular book has interpreted an event and instead begin to write a research report on the event itself. Stay focused on the book. If, for example, you are reviewing Raj Mankad's book on the Black Death, keep in mind that your topic is her book not the Black Death itself.
- **Writing a paper that does not reflect a thorough reading of the book.** Some students begin to write before they have spent time reading and evaluating a book with care. The result is often a paper that lacks detailed examples or only provides examples and ideas from one section of the book. Put time and thought into reading and reflecting on your book; it really is key to writing a successful review.
- **Not having a clear method of organization.** Like any paper, a book review needs a clear, logical structure that the reader can follow. Your reader should be able to predict what topic you will discuss next from your thesis and topic sentences.
- **Relying on personal opinions rather than reasoned judgments.** Some students write reviews based on their personal feelings toward a book deeming it "boring" or "exciting," "bad" or "good." These feelings may be

the first step toward a good evaluation of the book, but you need to dig deeper. What is it that makes the book "bad" or "good"? What specific evidence can you provide to illustrate the book's strengths and weaknesses? It is important to have opinions about the book, but it is also essential to base your opinions on a reasoned and careful assessment of the work.

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