

BOOK REVIEWS: How to write a book review

There are two approaches to book reviewing:

Descriptive reviews give the essential information about a book. This is done with description and exposition, by stating the perceived aims and purposes of the author, and by quoting striking passages from the text.

Critical reviews describe and evaluate the book, in terms of accepted literary and historical standards, and supports this evaluation with evidence from the text. The following pointers are meant to be suggestions for writing a critical review.

Basic requirements

To write a critical review, the reviewer must know two things:

Knowing the work under review: This demands not only attempting to understand the author's purpose and how the component parts of the work contribute to that purpose, but also knowledge of the author: his/her nationality, time period, other works etc.

Requirements of the genre: This means understanding the art form and how it functions. Without such context, the reviewer has no historical or literary standard upon which to base an evaluation.

Reviewing essentials

Description of the book. Sufficient description should be given so that the reader will have some understanding of the author's thoughts. This account is not a summary. It can be woven into the critical remarks.

Discuss the author. Biographical information should be relevant to the subject of the review and enhance the reader's understanding of the work under discussion.

Appraise the book. A review must be a considered judgment that includes:

- a statement of the reviewer's understanding of the author's purpose
- how well the reviewer feels the author's purpose has been achieved
- evidence to support the reviewer's judgement of the author's achievement.

While you read:

- Read the book with care.
- Highlight quotable passages.
- Note your impressions as you read.
- Allow time to assimilate what you read so that the book can be seen in perspective.
- Keep in mind the need for a single impression which must be clear to the reader.

The review outline

A review outline gives you an over-all grasp of the organization of the review, to determine the central point your review will make, to eliminate inessentials or irrelevancies, and to fill in gaps or omissions.

- Examine the notes you have made and eliminate those with no relationship to your central thesis.
- By organizing your discussion topics into groups, aspects of the book will emerge: e.g., theme, character, structure, etc.
- Write down all the major headings of the outline and fill in the subdivisions.
- All parts should support your thesis or central point.

First draft

Opening paragraphs set the tone of the paper. Possible introductions usually make a statement about the:

- Thesis
- Authorial purpose
- Topicality of the work or its significance
- Comparison of the work to others by the same author or within the same genre
- Author.

The **body of the review** logically develops your thesis. Follow your outline or adjust it to further your argument. The aim should be to push your central point. Put quoted material in quotation marks, or indented, and properly footnoted.

Concluding paragraphs sums up or restates your thesis or it may make a final judgement regarding the book. Do not introduce new information or ideas in the conclusion.

Revising the draft

- Allow time to elapse, at least a day, before starting your revision.
- Correct grammatical mistakes and punctuation as you find them.
- Read your paper through again looking for unity, organization and logical development.
- If necessary, do not hesitate to make major revisions in your draft.
- Verify quotations for accuracy and check the format and content of references.

Reviewing considerations

Fiction

Rule number one: do not give away the story!

Character

- From what sources are the characters drawn?
- What is the author's attitude toward his characters?
- Are the characters flat or three dimensional?
- Does character development occur?
- Is character delineation direct or indirect?

Theme

- What is/are the major theme(s)?
- How are they revealed and developed?
- Is the theme traditional and familiar, or new and original?

- Is the theme didactic, psychological, social, entertaining, escapist, etc. in purpose or intent?

Plot

- How are the various elements of plot (eg, introduction, suspense, climax, conclusion) handled?
- What is the relationship of plot to character delineation?
- To what extent, and how, is accident employed as a complicating and/or resolving force?
- What are the elements of mystery and suspense?
- What other devices of plot complication and resolution are employed?
- Is there a sub-plot and how is it related to the main plot?
- Is the plot primary or secondary to some of the other essential elements of the story (character, setting, style, etc.)?

Style

- What are the "intellectual qualities" of the writing (e.g., simplicity, clarity)?
- What are the "emotional qualities" of the writing (e.g., humour, wit, satire)?
- What are the "aesthetic qualities" of the writing (e.g., harmony, rhythm)?
- What stylistic devices are employed (e.g., symbolism, motifs, parody, allegory)?
- How effective is dialogue?

Setting

- What is the setting and does it play a significant role in the work?
- Is a sense of atmosphere evoked, and how?
- What scenic effects are used and how important and effective are they?
- Does the setting influence or impinge on the characters and/or plot?

Biography

- Does the book give a "full-length" picture of the subject?
- What phases of the subject's life receive greatest treatment and is this treatment justified?
- What is the point of view of the author?
- How is the subject matter organized: chronologically, retrospectively, etc.?
- Is the treatment superficial or does the author show extensive study into the subject's life?
- What source materials were used in the preparation of the biography?
- Is the work documented?
- Does the author attempt to get at the subject's hidden motives?
- What important new facts about the subject's life are revealed in the book?
- What is the relationship of the subject's career to contemporary history?
- How does the biography compare with others about the same person?
- How does it compare with other works by the same author?

History

- With what particular period does the book deal?
- How thorough is the treatment?
- What were the sources used?
- Is the account given in broad outline or in detail?
- Is the style that of reportorial writing, or is there an effort at interpretive writing?
- What is the point of view or thesis of the author?
- Is the treatment superficial or profound?
- For what group is the book intended (textbook, popular, scholarly, etc.)?
- What part does biographical writing play in the book?
- Is social history or political history emphasized?
- Are dates used extensively, and if so, are they used intelligently?
- Is the book a revision? How does it compare with earlier editions?
- Are maps, illustrations, charts, etc. used and how are these to be evaluated?

Reviewing poetry

- Is this a work of power, originality, individuality?
- What kind of poetry is under review (epic, lyrical, elegaic, etc.)?
- What poetical devices have been used (rhyme, rhythm, figures of speech, imagery, etc.), and to what effect?
- What is the central concern of the poem and is it effectively expressed?

Finding book reviews

Many indexes, such as ABI Inform and Historical Abstracts include citations to book reviews. Reviews can also be found at book-related online sites, such as Amazon.Com.

The following indexes are devoted entirely to book reviews:

- Book Review Digest 1905+ (Z 1219 B72 REF INDEX)
- Book Review Index 1965+ (Z 1035 A1 B72 REF INDEX)
- An Index to Book Reviews in the Humanities 1960-1990 (Z 1219 I38 REF INDEX)
- Canadian Book Review Annual 1975+ (Z 1375 C3 REF INDEX)