

## Writing Book Reviews:

A book review is a critical analysis of a secondary text, not a summary of the work's content. In a book review, you should evaluate the way in which the author handled the subject and the contribution of the book to your understanding of the issues discussed.

As a reviewer, you bring together the two strands of accurate, analytical reading and strong, personal response when you indicate what the book is about and what it might mean to a reader (by explaining what it meant to you). In other words, reviewers answer not only the WHAT but the SO WHAT question about a book. Thus, in writing a review, you combine the skills of describing what is on the page, analyzing how the book tried to achieve its purpose, and expressing your own reactions.

### Elements of the Book Review:

There are four basic categories to be considered in your evaluation--historiography, methodology, style, and personal evaluation.

A. Historiography: the tradition in which the author writes history. Historiography concerns the intellectual approach the author takes to the subject, the school of historical thought that most influences the author, and the assumptions, values, or analytical frameworks the author employs.

Ask yourself these questions:

- What is the author's theme or thesis? What is the author's purpose in writing the book?
- What are the author's values and biases? From what point of view does the author write?
- How does this book relate to other books on the same topic? Are the author's assumptions and assertions in agreement with those generally held in the field? If not, are deviations clearly identified, well motivated, and overtly justified?
- What impact does this work have in its field? Does it contribute something original? Will it have lasting value?

B. Methodology: the author's method includes the rules employed in organizing the evidence, the kinds of questions asked by the author, and the approach utilized in answering them.

- What kind of evidence does the author use to prove his or her points? What are the sources of the author's data? Are these sources adequate? What are the limitations of the data, any inherent biases or problems which must be taken into consideration in its use?
- What kinds of questions does the author ask about the subject. Are there questions which remain unasked, or questions asked but unanswered?

C. Style: the author's style has to do with the writing and organization of the book.

- Is the book well written? Are there passages of eloquence or elegance?
- Is the book well argued? Does the author clearly articulate and answer questions raised in the book? How well does the author's point come across and does it convince you?
- Is the book accessible to an intelligent reader or only to a specialist?

D. Personal Evaluation: think about your own approach to the subject, your own values, and your preferred method. Reading is not a passive experience, but an interaction between author and reader.

- What is your response to the author's point of view?
- What do you think to be the greatest strength of the work, and the greatest weakness?

- What does the book contribute to your understanding of the subject?
- How successful do you think the author was in carrying out the overall purposes of the book?

### Writing the Book Review:

Most reviews start off with a heading that includes all the bibliographic information about the book. Please use the following format:

*Title.* Author. Place of publication: publisher, date of publication. Number of pages.

Like most pieces of writing, the review itself usually begins with an introduction that lets your readers know what the review will say. The first paragraph usually includes the author and title again, so your readers don't have to look up to find the title. You should also include a very brief overview of the contents of the book, the purpose or audience for the book, and your reaction and evaluation. Reviews then generally move into a section of background information that helps place the book in context and discusses criteria for judging the book. Next, the review gives a summary of the main points of the book, quoting and paraphrasing key phrases from the author. Finally, reviewers get to the heart of their writing--their evaluation of the book. In this section, reviewers discuss a variety of issues:

- how well the book has achieved its goal
- how well does the book relate to others in the field or to other readings from class
- what possibilities are suggested by the book
- what the book has left out
- how the book compares to others on the subject
- what specific points or arguments are not convincing
- what personal experiences you've had related to the subject

It is important to carefully distinguish your views from the author's, so that you don't confuse your reader. Like other essays, book reviews usually end with a conclusion which ties together issues raised in the review and provides a concise comment on the book.

There is, of course, no set formula, but a general rule of thumb is that the first one-half to two-thirds of the review should summarize the author's main ideas and at least one-third should evaluate the book.

You may find it helpful to look at some sample reviews and/or read what other reviewers have thought about the book you are reviewing. One of the best sources is *Reviews in American History* (Z 1236 R47 in both the stacks and recent unbound periodicals; also available to CSULB students through Project Muse and J-Stor). The *Book Review Index* is also an obvious place to start [Ref Z 1035 A1B6]. You can also consult on-line resources such as H-Net (<http://www2.h-net.msu.edu/>) and the History Cooperative (<http://www.historycoop.org/>).