

# Book Reviews

## Why Should You Read Book Reviews?

- To keep up with the latest developments in your field of interest.
- To find out if a particular book looks interesting enough for you to want to read it.
- To find out what the reviewer thinks of the book and what you think of the review itself.

For general examples of book reviews, see the Saturday edition of *The Globe and Mail* or *The National Post*, and the Sunday edition of *The New York Times*. For academic examples, try *The London Review of Books*, the *New York Review of Books*, or visit the library to read journals from your field.

## What Is The Process Of Writing A Book Review?

- **Reread:** Know that you can neither understand nor form an opinion of a text unless you read it more than once.
- **Understand:** Fully grasping the academic argument by locating the main claim or thesis, supporting evidence, and underlying assumptions.
- **Summarize:** Writing an honest and accurate summary of what the book is about before you evaluate it.
- **Analyze:** Examining the parts of the book and understanding how they fit into a larger whole.
- **Evaluate:** Assessing the academic argument with an open mind and as an informed participant in the field – that is, as someone who understands how to select and apply relevant academic criteria to arrive at an evaluation after careful analysis. This can only happen after you have challenged the popular beliefs and stereotypes we are all subject to and moved to an informed level of understanding.

## What Pitfalls Should I Avoid?

A lot of students misunderstand what is meant by a review or a critical analysis. They take the word critical to mean negative criticism, and shoot from the hip with subjective comments and opinions. Rather, a review is about providing a careful analysis and balanced assessment of a book and its arguments.

## How Do I Read Critically?

- Get a **general overview** of the central focus of the book by first reading the preface and introduction if these sections are available.
- **Read and reread** the main text with an open mind until you understand the material and can restate the key ideas in your own words. This kind of reading is a learning process. You look up facts, words, concepts etc. and work to understand the text.
- **Summarize the analysis or argument** fairly and accurately. Remember to remain neutral and refrain from interpretation or evaluation in this state. To do a proper summary, you must identify the structural parts of a work and understand their sequence and relationship. You then identify the argument and its components: claims, reasons, evidence, and assumptions. Focus on the key points rather than getting lost in the details, otherwise your brief summary will become too long and you will risk losing critical perspective.
- **Ask questions** about the:
  - **Purpose, audience, and structure.** Why did the author write the book and what purpose was it meant to serve? Who is the intended audience? Why is the book structured the way it is?
  - **Analysis or argument.** Is it presented within a relevant context? Is the topic treated in a balanced ways? Are areas of the issue left unexplored? Do you agree or disagree with the arguments presented? Is the evidence complete, relevant, verifiable, accurate, and up-to-date? Is the reasoning logical? Does the author inform the audience of viewpoints that contradict his or her own?
  - **Way the analysis or argument is communicated to the audience.** Is the language used clear and articulate? Are there detailed illustrations and examples?

## How Do I Evaluate A Book?

An evaluation must always be based on clearly defined criteria, in this case, criteria that are acceptable to an academic audience. Saying that a book is very entertaining and exciting is not acceptable. You must define and apply criteria accepted by scholars in your field and determine where the book meets the criteria and where it does not. The criteria you develop will form the backbone of your assessment or argument, and your thesis will, in a book review, make the claim about the book that you think you can prove.

## What Should I Write In My Book Review?

- **Introduction:** Make sure that you introduce the author, title, and topic of the book to provide context for the review. If you follow this with an overview of the author's analysis or argument, it will be easy for you to lead up to your own evaluation of the book, stated in fairly general terms. The thesis, which comes at the end of the introduction, will be a succinct and specific statement of that evaluation; it will be the claim that you are ready to prove.
- **Body:** First, begin with a brief summary of the book – around a paragraph in length is ideal. The rest of the body of your essay will be the arguments that you are presenting about the book which support your thesis. Remember to divide your evaluation into units of thought suitable for paragraph writing. The substance of each paragraph will be your reasoning and the relevant specific evidence from the text used to support that reasoning. The body of your essay should demonstrate, through valid reasoning and effective use and analysis of textual evidence, why the reader should accept your argument about the author's work.
- **Conclusion:** The conclusion is the place to reiterate and reinforce your thesis, as well as the main points of your argument. In addition, your conclusion can state what can be learned from the book you have evaluated, as well as what the benefits of the book are to both readers and the academic field in general. Feel free to situate your arguments into a broader academic or cultural context, but do not introduce new arguments or evidence.