

Book Reviews

A book review gives you an excellent opportunity to exercise your analytical, critical, and writing skills while providing a real service to someone who is interested in your field but has not read the book you've read. Through your review you can advise your reader whether or not to read the book. Following are a few points to consider and some tips on writing a review.

1. Note the book's purpose. Is it to inform, persuade, amuse, explain, describe?
2. Note the book's thesis. Check out the preface or introduction.
3. Note the organization of the book. Check out the table of contents. Is it chronological or topical? Is it organized by, say, cause and effect?
4. Read the book and take notes, recording page numbers and passages that relate to points you may want to consider in your review. Summarize each chapter as you finish it.
5. Make notes of examples and scholarship. Look at the author's sources, data, logical conclusions, any biases, bibliography, etc.
6. Make notes on the author's style. Are there particularly memorable passages? Is the style suited to the subject and audience?
7. Does the author get off track any time or stick pretty much to the purpose?

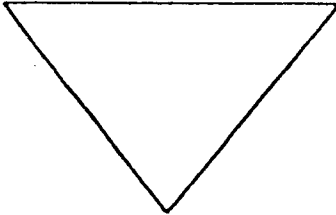

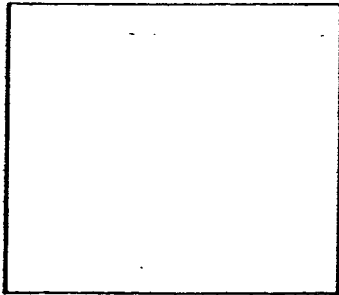
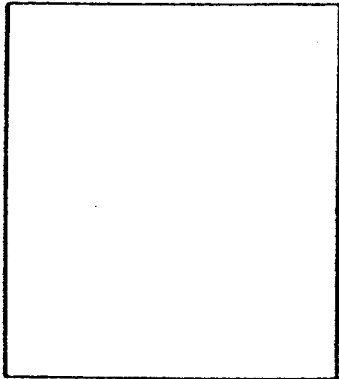
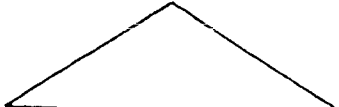
With these things done you're ready to write. The following process can help you do this. Start a rough draft using this general outline:

1. List the bibliographic data for the book: author(s), title, place (city [state]) of publication, publisher, year of publication, pages, price.
2. Give a little information about the author (experience, background, academic qualifications, previous publications).
3. State the thesis and general purpose of the book.
4. Summarize the book. Include brief quotations, specific references to the text, and examples as necessary for illustration and support.
5. Evaluate the book. If you view it favorably, get its weaknesses out of the way first and then go on about its strengths; if unfavorably, the other way around. Support your assessment with evidence from the book. If it's full of jargon, for example, quote some. Was the book worth your while? Will it be worth reading for other people interested in the field?
6. Conclude with your recommendation—should your audience read the book? Why?

Now you need to start revising your rough draft, with the help of a supportive but critical reader if possible. Proofread (doing this out loud is a good way to catch problems and to ensure it sounds good) thoroughly. Give it a telling title, if you like.

Book Review: Essay Structure

Book reviews can be organized in a variety of ways. The following scheme will provide you with a guideline; however, you are free to manipulate, add to, subtract, or reorganize the guideline as necessary. You must determine the number of paragraphs you will need to devote to the summary, content, and evaluation.

	Title Bibliographic entry
Introduction to your review Background of subject Author and title Author's credentials Author's background Nature and scope of book Your thesis and tone	
Summary of book Author's purpose/intent Author's audience Author's thesis Summary of main points	
Content of book Knowledge revealed Ideas Visions Specific examples (all supported with quotations, paraphrases, and summaries with specific page references)	
Evaluation of book Author's organization Author's style: diction, sentences, and tone Author's fulfillment of intention Value of book Practical application Outstanding features Strengths Weaknesses Personal reactions	
Conclusion Summary Culmination of analysis Final recommendation	

HOW TO WRITE GOOD

Here are several very important but often forgotten rules of English:

1. Avoid alliteration. Always.
2. Prepositions are not words to end sentences with.
3. Avoid cliches like the plague. (They're old hat.)
4. Employ the vernacular.
5. Eschew ampersands & abbreviations, etc.
6. Parenthetical remarks (however relevant) are unnecessary.
7. It is wrong to ever split an infinitive.
8. Contractions aren't necessary.
9. Foreign words and phrases are not apropos.
10. One should never generalize.
11. Eliminate quotations. As Ralph Waldo Emerson once said:
"I hate quotations. Tell me what you know."
12. Comparisons are as bad as cliches.
13. Don't be redundant; don't more use words than necessary;
it's highly superfluous.
14. Profanity sucks.
15. Be more or less specific.
16. Understatement is always best.
17. Exaggeration is a billion times worse than understatement.
18. One-word sentences? Eliminate.
19. Analogies in writing are like feathers on a snake.
20. The passive voice is to be avoided.
21. Go around the barn at high noon to avoid colloquialisms.
22. Even if a mixed metaphor sings, it should be derailed.
23. Who needs rhetorical questions?

QUICK TIP:

A CHECKLIST FOR UNDERSTANDING YOUR READERS

Although you should think about your readers right from the start, you can't expect to answer all of these questions until you near the end of your research. So plan to return to this checklist a few times, each time filling out more of the picture of the role you will create for your readers.

WHO IS YOUR COMMUNITY OF READERS?

1. Are your readers
 - Professionals in the field of your research?
 - General readers who have
 - different levels of knowledge and interest?
 - similar levels of knowledge and interest?
2. For each uniform group of readers, repeat the following analysis.

WHAT DO THEY EXPECT YOU TO DO FOR THEM?

1. Entertain them?
2. Help them solve some problem out there in the world?
3. Help them understand something better?

HOW MUCH DO THEY KNOW?

1. Level of background knowledge (compared to you):
much less less same more much more
2. Knowledge about the particular topic (compared to you):
much less less same more much more
3. What special interest do they have in this topic?
4. What matters do they expect you to discuss about this topic?

DO THEY ALREADY UNDERSTAND YOUR PROBLEM/QUESTION?

1. Is the problem of this paper one that your readers recognize?
2. Is it one that they have but haven't yet recognized?
3. Is the problem not theirs, but yours?

Quick Tip: A Checklist

4. Will they immediately take the problem seriously, or must you persuade them that it matters?
5. Is the research problem motivated by a tangible difficulty in the world or by a scholarly, conceptual difficulty?

HOW WILL THEY RESPOND TO YOUR SOLUTION/ANSWER?

1. What do you expect readers to do as a result of reading your report: accept new information, change certain beliefs, take some action?
2. Will the solution contradict what they already believe? How?
3. Will readers already know some standard arguments against your solution?
4. Will the solution stand alone or will readers want to see the steps that led to it?

IN WHAT FORUM WILL THEY ENCOUNTER YOUR REPORT?

1. Have your readers asked for your report? will you send it to them unbidden? will they encounter it in a publication?
2. Before it reaches your main readers, will your report have to be approved by a gatekeeper—your supervisor, an editor of a publication, an assistant to an executive or administrator, a technical expert?
3. Do readers expect your report to follow a standard format? If so, what is it?

From: Booth, Wayne et al. The Craft of Research. Chicago: U of Chicago Press, 1995.