

## **Book Review Guidelines**

### **Characteristics of a good review:**

The review should introduce the reader to the book's content and focus on the subject of the book being reviewed.

- Include an exposition of how the book fits into the current thinking on the subject (e.g., a novel approach, an introduction, a magisterial review, the finest book on the subject ever written, etc.).
- Avoid repeating its table of contents; rather, give the reader some idea of the author's thesis and how he or she develops it.
- If the book is an edited collection of essays, or chapters by different individuals, give some idea of the overall theme and content, but be free to focus on specific chapters you consider particularly significant or worthwhile.
- Inform the reader about what is happening in the area of academic activity the book addresses; what the state of knowledge is in the subject; and how this new book adds, changes, or breaks new ground in our knowledge of this subject.

The review should be fair to the author.

- Tell readers why the author took many months to write the book, who the intended audience is, and how the author handles his or her material.
- Convey the content of the book, not chapter by chapter so much as the entire book.
- Add flavor to the review by including pungent or revealing quotations from the book or notable facts or findings.
- Be specific. Give details. Try not to be too abstract or vague (e.g., avoid writing "interesting observations," "lots of arresting data," or "a strange view of campus design" unless you complement this with specific examples).

You should submerge your own opinions or reaction.

- Write the review about the book and its contribution to the subject, not about the reviewer's feelings on having read the book.
- Do not tell the author what book you feel he or she should have written.
- The reviewer's appraisal is valuable, but this should be quite secondary.

## **How to Write a Book Review**

There are two approaches to book reviewing: the descriptive and the critical. A descriptive review is one in which the writer, without over-enthusiasm or exaggeration, gives the essential information about a book. This is done by description and exposition, by stating the perceived aims and purposes of the author, and by quoting striking passages from the text. A critical review is one in which the writer describes and evaluates 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**

Simply stated, the reviewer must know two things in order to write a critical review:

- the work being reviewed and
  - the requirements of the genre to which the work belongs (novel, short story, biography, poetry, etc.).
- 1 Knowledge of the work demands not only an attempt to understand what the author's purpose is and how the component parts of the work contribute to that purpose, but also some knowledge of the author--his/her nationality, time period, other works etc.
  - 2 Knowledge of the genre means understanding the art form and how it functions. Without such understanding, the reviewer has no historical or literary standard upon which to base his/her evaluation.

### **Minimum Essentials of a Book Review**

- 1 Description, not a summary, of the book. Sufficient description should be given so that the reader, as he reads the review, will have some understanding of the author's thoughts. This account of the contents of a book can often be woven into the critical remarks.
- 2 Something about, not a biography of, the author. Biographical information should be relevant to the subject of the review and enhance the reader's understanding of the work under discussion.
- 3 An appraisal, preferably indirect, through description and exposition and based on the aims and purposes of the author. While a critical review is a statement of opinion, it must be a considered judgement including:
  - 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.

### **Preliminary Mechanical Steps**

- 1 Read the book with care.
- 2 Note effective passages for quoting.
- 3 Note your impressions as you read.
- 4 Allow yourself time to assimilate what you have read so that the book can be seen in perspective.
- 5 Keep in mind the need for achieving a single impression which must be made clear to the reader.

### **The Review Outline**

The review outline enables you to get an over-all grasp of the organization of the review, to determine what central point your review is going to make, to eliminate inessentials or irrelevancies, and to fill in gaps or omissions.

By examining the notes you have made and eliminating those which have no relationship to your central

thesis, and by organizing them into groups, several aspects of the book will emerge: e.g., theme, character, structure, etc. After ordering your topics--determining in what sequence they will be discussed--write down all the major headings of the outline and then fill in the subdivisions. Keep in mind that all parts of the outline should support your thesis or central point.

### **The Draft**

The opening paragraph, like the concluding one, is in a position of emphasis and usually sets the tone of the paper. Among the various possible introductions are:

- a statement of the thesis
- a statement of the author's purpose
- a statement about the topicality of the work or its significance
- a comparison of the work to others by the same author or within the same genre
- a statement about the author

The main body of the review should logically develop your thesis as organized by your outline. Changes in the outline may need to be made and transitional paragraphs introduced, but the aim should be toward logical development of the central point. Quoted material should be put in quotation marks, or indented, and properly footnoted.

The concluding paragraph may sum up or restate your thesis or may make the final judgement regarding the book. No new information or ideas should be introduced in the conclusion.

### **Steps in Revising the Draft**

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

### **Some Considerations When Reviewing History**

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