

GUIDELINES TO WRITING A BOOK REVIEW

MODIFIED GUIDELINES TAKEN FROM:

Jacques Barzun and Henry F. Graff's *The Modern Researcher, 5th ed.*
(New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich Inc., 1992.)

This structure serves as a guideline and *not* a template.

- 1) Introduce the book
 - Purpose is to link together the forthcoming paragraphs into a few captivating sentences
 - Should live up to the rest of the review
 - Do not begin with the phrase, "This book..."
 - Must include the following indicia: the author's name and the book's title
 - Understand the book's purpose and scope and convey these findings to the reader

- 2) Classify the book
 - Situate the book's place in the literature and beyond
 - Present book's thesis, themes, and tendencies

- 3) Discuss the author's main arguments
 - Outline the book's content
 - Provide readers with supporting reasons for your earlier classification of the book

- 4) Explain how the book compares with other books in the field
 - Present additional or contrary points found in other books by the same author and with other authors in the same field
 - Limit your explanation to qualifications and/or amendments of the author's points
 - Evaluate the book against a background of the author's purported objectives (have they been achieved?)

- 5) If need be, deliver key shortcomings of the book
 - Do not be petty, keep objections to the substantive nature of the book

- 6) If need be, suggest how the author ought to clear up questionable points and fill in any gaps
 - Should include your knowledge on the subject and themes that the author may/not have included, intentionally or unintentionally

- 7) Tell the readers how the book will change readers' views of the subject/field

- 8) Provide an appraisal of the author and the book
 - Remember the following points:
 - o The last word belongs to the author and his/her book
 - o Insofar as the Journal's (limited) readership goes, the author's fate is in your hands
 - o Be fair in the balance of the book's merits and faults
 - o Respect the amount of work that has gone into writing the book

SOME USEFUL ADVICE TO KEEP IN MIND WHILE WRITING YOUR BOOK REVIEW,

Taken from John E. Drewry's *Writing Book Reviews* (Boston: The Writer, Inc., 1966)

J. Donald Adams – *Editor of the New York Times Book Review*

The reviewer should bring to the review “factual knowledge and capacity of sympathetic understanding.

Edward Weeks – *Editor of The Atlantic Monthly, The Peripatetic Reviewer*

“The Ten Commandments:

- 1) Don't use loose words (i.e. “thrilling, “intriguing”) in describing the book.
- 2) Practice humility in stating your opinion of the book. Allow for the possibility that your judgment may not be infallible.
- 3) Don't give away the contents or the plot of the book
- 4) Read the book, don't skim it.
- 5) When you read, allow 60% of your thoughts to be swept into the main current of the story: keep the other 40% detached and observant on the river bank. Pause whenever a note seems worth taking.
- 6) Ask yourself what the author is trying to do.
- 7) Ask yourself how well he has done this.
- 8) Ask yourself, in your opinion, was it worth doing.
- 9) If possible, hold what you have written for 24 hours and show it to someone whose judgment you respect. Second thoughts will often modify the first flush of enthusiasm.
- 10) Avoid superlatives, i.e. calling the author “a Shakespeare.”

Richard Kluger – *Editor of Book Week, the Sunday supplement of book reviews to many newspapers*

“It gives the editors of *Book Week* no pleasure to run a sharply negative review of a book that, after all, consumed a great deal or a lot of people's energy and time. It does give us pleasure...to run glowing notices of a deserving book...”

“Be sufficiently expository for the reader to get a clear idea of the contents of the book...The subjective review...misses its aim if the reader gets no clear idea of what the author has been trying to say. The opposite extreme is the colorless description...”

Orville Prescott – *Co-editor of Books of the Times (New York Times)*

“They forget that book reviews are not supposed to make up somebody else's mind. They are supposed to help him make up his own mind as to whether a book is for him or not.”

Diana Trilling – *Book Columnist*

“...the first responsibility...is to the book...[not] reviewing which is primarily directed to the glorification of the reviewer at the expense of the object under examination.”

Elmo Ellis – *General manager of WSB Radio, Atlanta*

Don't review books that you consider inferior works. Choose a worthy volume for review.

Dr. Allan Nevins

“Criticism is implicit in any good summary or exposition...The very arrangement of your exposition, the way in which you emphasize some parts of a book and ignore other parts, is a form of criticism...”

IMPORTANT POINTS

- Include the book's full bibliographic information in the review.
- Avoid including biographical information on the author unless it is relevant to the review and enhances the reader's understanding of the work under discussion.
- Footnote referenced material properly.
- Avoid quoting extensively from the book; and minimize the use of block quotes.
- Avoid simply summarizing the book.
- Don't ignore the page or word limits specified by the journal (1800-2500 words for a book review).
- Don't assume your audience is a specialist in field.
- Avoid criticizing the author for failing to write the book that the reviewer had in mind.
- Avoid using the review as a pretext for showcasing the reviewer's own theses and works.
- Avoid hyperbole and excessive cheerleading for the book or author.

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For further guides to writing book reviews, see:

<http://astro.temple.edu/~rimmerma/256revs.html>

<http://www.usd.edu/~tschorn/BookReview.pdf>