

Writing a Book Review



Writing a book review is one of the fundamental skills that every historian must learn. A good book review should accomplish three main goals:

1. Lay out an author's argument;
2. Fit that argument into a wider historical context;
3. Most importantly, critique the historical argument.

It is important to remember that a book review is not a summary of an argument or a book report. You need to do more than simply lay out the plot-line of a book or article. You must convincingly inform your reader of the value of the historical argument being made and how effectively the author makes it.

Remember that the focus of your paper needs to be on the author and the argument, not about the history related in the book or article. You want to critique the argument, not describe the historical narrative.

The "How To" of Book Reviews

Writing a book review may seem very difficult, but in fact there are some simple rules you can follow to make the process much easier.

- **Summarize the author's argument as quickly as possible.**

Write down the major thesis, or theses, of the book or article. This will let your readers know what the book is about. A few sentences should do. Don't describe the history. Assume that if they want to know more detail about the chronological narrative, they can read the book themselves. Your critique of the book should let them know if it will be worth their while.

- **Write a sentence or two about what kind of history you may be reading.**

Is the focus on gender? class? race? politics? culture? something else? a combination? If you can identify the type of history the historian writes, you can assess the value of her interpretation and historical argument.

- **Look closely at the kinds of examples the author uses to prove his argument.**

Does he relate anecdotes? Does he use tables and statistics? Something else? Do his examples fit his argument? Are they convincing? If so, give a particularly helpful example and explain why. If not, give an example and explanation of that. You may find that some examples work, while some do not. Explain both sides, give examples, and let your readers know what you think overall.

- **Look closely at the kinds of sources the author uses to prove her argument.**

Are the primary sources all from the same newspaper? Are there a variety of different kinds of primary sources? What is the main group? Why does the author choose to analyze those sources? Do you think there is something missing? If so, what? Why? Do you think the author uses her sources well? Why or why not?

How about the secondary sources? When were they published? How might this affect the argument? Do you recognize any of the sources? What do you think of those that you recognize? What do you think of the author's interpretation of those secondary works?

- **Is the argument convincing as a whole?**

What is your opinion of the book or article? Does the argument work? Is there a particular place where you think it breaks down? Why? Is there a particular element that you think works best? Why? Would you recommend this book to others? Why? Would you put qualifications on that recommendation? Why?

Bearing all of this advice in mind, here is just one example of how you might format a book review:

1. Introduction: set out the main argument of the book you read.
2. Paragraph 1: summarize the book in NO MORE than one paragraph.
3. Paragraph 2: What are the strengths of the book?
4. Paragraph 3: What are the weaknesses of the book?
5. Paragraph 4: What is your opinion of the methodology (the sources and how they are used)?
6. Conclusion.