

Guidelines for Writing a Critical Review

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You will find the following resources very useful in the writing of academic article and book reviews. READ WELL!

But first, a note from me.

The advice you'll find below from Steve McCluskey, a colleague at the University of Virginia is obvious, but easily overlooked! I have one point to add to it, which is that you should use a number of other (4? 5?) texts in your critique. For example, in the Introductory module, by the time you write your review, you will have read a number of works on 'culture'. Any one of these could be used to support your analysis and criticism.

1. University of New South Wales, Learning Skills Centre, 'Writing a Critical Review'
<http://www.lc.unsw.edu.au/onlib/critrev.html>

2. University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. '
http://www.unc.edu/depts/wcweb/handouts/literature_review.html, 'Literature Reviews'

3. Academic Journal Reviews
Steve McCluskey
University of Virginia

Academic journal and book reviews serve as concise overviews of new publications. They provide interested specialist and non-specialist readers with a 'bluffer's guide' to the book's content and a critique of its argument. Writing a good one may take several drafts, as they must be short, precise, yet insightful and analytical. Use the following four steps to help you write your book review:

I Identify

Identify the text through a complete bibliographic entry in the first sentence;
comment on the nature of the text

II Locate

Identify the subject matter and the intended audience (students, scholars, general public, etc.) place the text(s) in current historiographical debate, if possible: is the author consciously trying to refute someone else's arguments? if so, who, or which group of historians? upon which side of the debate is the writer? (read the introduction and first chapters carefully, as this information is most likely to be located there)

III Summarise

Briefly summarise the book; what is the author's argument?
depending upon the structure of the book and the complexity of the argument, you may be able to write an overall summary or you may need to deal with multiple arguments or the development of an argument by following the author's use of sections or parts;

IV Analyse

Examine the author's argument and his/her use of sources;
what kinds of sources have been used? are there any obvious sources or types of sources that are missing? is the argument well-footnoted?
does the author prove his/her point? if not, why not?
identify the book's greatest strength(s) and greatest weakness(es);
would you recommend it? why or why not?

4. From, 'Writing the Academic Book Review by Wendy Belcher'
http://www.chicano.ucla.edu/press/siteart/jli_bookreviewguidelines.pdf

Avoiding Five Common Pitfalls

1. Evaluate the text, don't just summarize it. While a succinct restatement of the text's points is important, part of writing a book review is making a judgment. Is the book a contribution to the field? Does it add to our knowledge? Should this book be read and by whom? One needn't be negative to evaluate; for instance, explaining how a text relates to current debates in the field is a form of evaluation.
2. Do not cover everything in the book. In other words, don't use the table of contents as a structuring principle for your review. Try to organize your review around the book's argument or your argument about the book.
3. Judge the book by its intentions not yours. Don't criticize the author for failing to write the book you think that he or she should have written. As John Updike puts it, "Do not imagine yourself the caretaker of any tradition, an enforcer of any party standards, a warrior in any ideological battle, a corrections officer of any kind."
4. Likewise, don't spend too much time focusing on gaps. Since a book is only 200 to 500 pages, it cannot possibly address the richness of any topic. For this reason, the most common criticism in any review is that the book doesn't address some part of the topic. If the book purports to be about ethnicity and film and yet lacks a chapter on Latinos, by all means, mention it. Just don't belabor the point. Another tic of reviewers is to focus too much on books the author did not cite. If you are using their bibliography just to display your own knowledge it will be obvious to the reader. Keep such criticisms brief.
5. Don't use too many quotes from the book. It is best to paraphrase or use short telling quotes within sentences.