Critical Book Reviews

A critical book review requires that you identify, summarize, and most importantly, evaluate the ideas and information the author has presented.

A critical book review is not a book report. Reports discuss content, while reviews evaluate the book’s strengths, weaknesses and validity through explanation, interpretation and analysis.

Critical reviews can be positive or negative, based on your assessment of the book.

The information in this guide provides some guidelines only. Book reviews can vary in a number of ways, including length, scope, intended audience and complexity

Writing a Critical Book Review

Reviews generally provide:

- Full bibliographic information (author, title, edition, publisher, place of publication, year of publication), often presented as a heading or introductory sentence
- A brief description of the contents of the book
- An assessment of the author's authority/biases
- An evaluation of the strengths and weaknesses of the book based on the purposes of the author, and using evidence to support the reviewer's argument
- An overall assessment of the book

Suggested steps in writing a critical book review:

Get to know the work by reading the book carefully and by reading other opinions of the book. In getting to know the book, use all the information within the book itself.

- Look at the title page; is there a sub-title?
- Note when the book was first published.
- Is there a table of contents or chapter headings? If so, use these as an orientation to the organization and contents of the book.
- If a bibliography is present, give it careful scrutiny to determine what may have contributed to the author's conclusions. Also consider the quality and veracity of these sources.
- Always read the preface or introduction for statements about the book's intentions and/or limitations.
- As you read, take notes and flag passages that you feel are illustrative of the purpose, theme and style of the work. Note strengths as well as weaknesses, and use the questions in the next box to guide your assessment.

Establish the thesis of your review. Think about what the main point of your criticism will be. Consider the author’s intention in writing the book and whether this was achieved.

Organize your notes into an outline which incorporates your thesis.

Questions to Consider
Authority/Objectivity

- Who is the author?
- What are his or her particular credentials and expertise in this area? What makes him or her an expert on this topic?

Audience

- Who is the intended audience of this book (academics, students, the general public)?
- Is the book appropriate for its audience?

Scope/Purpose/Content

- What is the subject of the work and the broad field and/or genre into which it fits?
- What is the scope of the work? Is this a comprehensive overview or a detailed analysis?
- What is the author’s purpose in writing this book? What has he or she set out to prove? What is the overarching thesis of the book? How well has the author met these goals? Does the author do what he or she has set out to do?
- What are the main points set out by the author?
- How does the author prove the thesis and main points? What is the author’s methodology? What evidence does the author provide to support his or her argument (sources, data, personal anecdotes, etc.)? Is this evidence convincing?

Style

- How is the book structured? Is its development orderly and logical?
- What is the author’s writing style? Is it narrative or analytical? Is the prose readable and appropriate to its intended audience?

Other Points to Consider

- How does this book compare to other books on the same subject? Does it present a unique perspective or new research?
- Does the book have illustrations? A list of references or a bibliography? An index? Are there any other features? Are they effective and useful?
- Does the author suggest areas for further research or discussion?
- What has been left out?

Finally

- What is your final assessment? Would you buy this book or recommend it to others?