Writing a Book Review†

A reviewer should view all books as responsive, or dialogical, referring to the fact that authors are prompted to write by a prior rhetorical situation—a communicative exigence like a problem or opportunity. Thus, a reviewer must discover the problem or opportunity to evaluate how well the author has “solved” it. One should ask these questions: What motivated the author to write? Has the author understood the problem accurately and fully from several perspectives? Is the author qualified to address the problem? Has the author proposed a significant thesis as a solution to the conceptual or practical problem, or as a plan for the opportunity? (see A Manual for Writer I.2).

Example reviews of theological books are available at JETS: Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society (open the link, select a volume, and find “Book Reviews” for fine examples). Reviewers record the bibliographic entry at the top of the page for the book under review: Author’s last name, first name. Title of Book. City: Publisher, Year Published. Then reviewers cite all references of the book using parenthetical citation of page numbers (19.1).

The following guidelines offer a flexible structure for writing college or graduate-level critical book reviews, ranging from ten to fifteen paragraphs, or approximately five pages. Of course, one should apply the appropriate style guide, such as Turabian/Chicago style, while addressing these seven (or some similar) critical questions.

1. **Author’s situation**: Introducing a book, a reviewer should explain the rhetorical situation, describing briefly the book’s purpose, scope, and place in the situation or discipline for which it was written.

2. **Author’s thesis**: In a second paragraph, a reviewer should state the author’s thesis, or main claim. In this section comes the reviewer’s thesis addressing the question: What is the quality of the author’s proposed solution to the problem? The reviewer offers a qualitative thesis about the quality or accuracy of the author’s argument; so a reviewer’s thesis emphasizes adjectives regarding quality. The reviewer should also discuss any relevant viewpoint or bias that may indicate why the author chose this thesis, or why the thesis is expressed a certain way, or other relevant information about focus—what is included or excluded.

3. **Author’s arguments**: In three or four paragraphs, a reviewer should summarize the author’s claims, key terms, and distinctions and how they are discussed or supported or grounded in evidence; one paragraph per chapter or section is appropriate.

4. **Weaknesses**: Next, in two or three paragraphs, a reviewer should discuss the book’s weaknesses, such as problems, omissions, or contrary points based in one’s own knowledge or from research. A reviewer should avoid overly subjective opinions, such as “I just didn’t like it,” or “It was too hard to read.”

5. **Strengths**: Next, a reviewer should focus on the book’s strengths and on one’s agreements; also, if applicable, discuss why some weaknesses do not detract from the work or its thesis.

6. **Tone**: In a paragraph or two, a reviewer should discuss the book’s tone or style, expressing how the book inspires (or discourages) readers to learn more about the topic, or otherwise affects readers. Suggest what should be the next step in response to the book’s argument, challenge, or implications.

7. **Conclusion**: For the concluding paragraph, a reviewer should highlight the merits of the work, why it is significant, or not so important, and the value that it offers to specific or general readers.

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