

On Writing Book Reviews

A book review is a critical analysis of a secondary text. Usually it consists of two parts: to summarize the major contents (or arguments) of the book and to evaluate the accomplishments of the book that the author(s) often lays out at the very beginning of the book. In a book review, you should evaluate the way in which the author handled the subject and the contribution of the book to your understanding of the issues discussed.

Successful book reviews answer three questions:

- What did the writer of the book try to communicate? Here you should pay special attention to what the author has claimed to make a unique contribution (either opening up a new perspective, filling a gap, modifying or improving an existing argument, or refuting a conventional view, or building a new data set for further research).
- How clearly and convincingly did s/he get this message across to the reader? What kinds of theories, methods and data/evidences have been used? Are they creative, systemic, and effective?
- Was the message worth reading? Has the author dealt with an important issue? Has the author offered solutions or remedies to the problem?

To start writing a book review, make sure you do the following:

- Read the book thoroughly. Sometimes you have to read the introduction and the conclusion first to get a full picture of the book. You may have to read them more than other content chapters because the author often states his/her thesis, methodology, contributions, findings and remaining issues in these two places.
- Respond to the book by writing down your comments and afterthoughts as you read.
- Get a summary of the book by searching through the library, Book Review Digest, or Amazon.com. Some books or authors have their own websites.
- Many books are extension of an original article. To find the article in which the author first publicizes his/her ideas will help you understand the major ideas and themes of the book. For example, Samuel Huntington's *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* was based on his article first appeared in *Foreign Affairs* and *The New York Times*; Benjamin R. Barber's *Jihad vs. McWorld* also first appeared as an article in *The Atlantic*.

Book reviews should include the following major elements:

- A crisp summary of what the book is about. What is the author's theme or thesis? Tell enough about the content to identify the author's major points. What is the author's purpose in writing the book?

- How did the author write about the book? What are the author's values and biases? From what point of view does the author write? You have to identify to what school of theory the author has related (e.g., liberal, conservative, radical, Marxist, feminist, rationalist, or some great masters in social sciences such as Max Weber, Michel Foucault, Hannah Arendt, and others).
- Are the author's assumptions and assertions in agreement with those generally held in the field? If not, are deviations clearly identified, well motivated, and overtly justified?
- What impact does this work have in its field? Does it contribute something original (some books, such as E. Wright Mills's *The Power Elite* was responsible for the critical elite theory)? Will it have lasting value? To evaluate a book in the discipline of political science, try to follow the criteria as follows:
 1. How important is the subject to the study of politics and government?
 2. How complete and thorough is the author's coverage of the subject?
 3. How carefully is the author's analysis conducted?
 4. What are the strengths and limitations of the author's methodology?
 5. What is the quality of writing? Is it clear, precise, and interesting?
 6. How does this book compare with others on the subject?
 7. What contribution does this book make to political science?
 8. Who will enjoy or benefit from this book?
- Methodology: the author's method includes the rules (you can think about case study, comparison, statistical analysis, institutional analysis, etc.) employed in organizing the evidence, the kinds of questions asked by the author, and the approach utilized in answering them.
 1. What are the sources of the author's data? Are these sources adequate? What are the limitations of the data, any inherent biases or problems that must be taken into consideration in its use?
 2. What kinds of questions does the author ask about the subject? Are there questions that remain unasked, or questions asked but unanswered?
- Style: the author's style has to do with the writing and organization of the book.
 1. Is the book well written? Are there passages of eloquence or elegance?
 2. Is the book well argued? Does the author clearly articulate and answer questions raised in the book? How well does the author's point come across and does it convince you?
 3. Is the book accessible to an intelligent reader or only to a specialist?
- Personal Evaluation: think about your own approach to the subject, your own values, and your preferred method. Reading is not a passive experience, but an interaction between author and reader.
 1. What is your response to the author's point of view?
 2. What do you think to be the greatest strength of the work, and the greatest weakness?
 3. What does the book contribute to your understanding of the subject?

The form of a book review is an essay. You should begin with an introduction that both grabs the reader's attention and provides a statement of the points you intend to make (a

thesis statement). You may then choose to move on and write a paragraph about each of the categories. Finally, you will want to provide a conclusion for your essay that sums up your argument.

You should consult a writing manual book for format, or choose a journal for your reference. Once you have decided on one format, follow it consistently in your writing.

*This guide is prepared by Prof. Ming Xia, partially based on the materials from *The Political Science Student Writer's manual (3rd Edition)*, by Gregory M. Scott and Stephen M. Garrison, Prentice Hall, 2000; Professor [Catherine Lavender](#) for [History 401](#) (Advanced Seminar in Historical Method), The Department of History, The College of Staten Island of The City University of New York.*