

## Writing a Book Review

An academic book review is a critical evaluation of a book's strengths, limitations, and effectiveness as a piece of scholarship. While the exact contents of your book review will vary depending on your assignment, most book reviews typically have two main objectives:

- 1) To describe what the book is about by summarizing and paraphrasing its contents and central argument.
- 2) To evaluate the book's argument, determine its effectiveness, and discuss the book's contribution to a scholarly field.

This handout describes the steps you should take to complete both parts of an academic book review.

### Step 1: Read the Book Critically

Before you begin writing your book review, it is important to read the book critically and take comprehensive notes on the book's contents and argument. Most authors state their argument in the introduction and conclusion of their book. Read these sections carefully to understand what the author is trying to accomplish and determine the significance of their research. You should then read the remainder of the book to examine whether the author argues their thesis effectively.

As you read the different chapters of the book, you should note what pieces of evidence the author uses to support their central claim. You do not need to record every example the author provides, but it is helpful to note important pieces of evidence they use to support their argument.

Here are some questions to consider while reading the book and taking notes:

- What is the subject and scope of the book?
- What is the author's research question?
- What is the author's thesis? What is the significance of their argument?
- What are the main themes of the book? What are the author's main findings?
- Does the author use a theoretical framework or methodology?
- What key pieces of evidence does the author use to support their thesis?
- What kind of sources does the author use (primary, secondary, etc.)?

### Step 2: Provide an Overview of the Book

You are ready to begin writing once you have taken accurate notes on the book's contents and argument. Book reviews typically include an introduction that introduces the author, title, and topic of the book. Using your notes, you should then summarize and paraphrase the book's central argument and key pieces of evidence for your reader.

Summarizing the book's central thesis serves two purposes. First, it provides your reader with a clear overview of the book's argument and purpose. Second, your summary should help establish your evaluation of the book and foreshadow your analysis. The details you

include in your summary should provide the background knowledge your reader needs to understand your evaluation.

The summary of your book should initially be neutral in tone. You should provide an unbiased account of the book's argument even if you do not agree with it. Your reader will not be able to understand your evaluation of the book without this important context.

## Step 3: Evaluate the Book

Most book review assignments require you to do more than simply summarize the book's contents. Your book review must also evaluate the book's strengths, weaknesses, and determine whether it successfully argues its central thesis. It is not enough to simply say whether you agree with an author's argument. Effective evaluations will describe why you agree or disagree and provide specific examples to support your claim.

Your review may answer questions such as:

- Does the book meet its objectives and answer its research question?
- Do you agree or disagree with the argument it presents?
- Is the book's evidence accurate? What sources does the author use?
- How does its method, theory, or framework shape the author's argument?
- How does it contribute to your field of study? How does it connect with other scholarship?
- Does it challenge other scholars or build on the works of others?
- What areas are left unexplored? Do these areas weaken the argument, or do they provide opportunities for future analysis?

Remember, your evaluations of the book can be positive as well as negative. An effective book review will typically describe what the book achieves in addition to its shortcomings.

It is also important to consider how external factors shape the book and its goals as well. Your review may also consider questions such as:

- Is the author qualified to write their book? What are their credentials for writing the book?
- Was the book published by a university press?
- Who is the book's primary audience? Is it meant for public consumption or a specialized audience?