

CRITICAL BOOK REVIEW¹

**While a book review presents *CONTENT*,
it is, at its heart, *ANALYSIS*.**

Your **3-page** essay should include ***in whatever order and with whatever emphasis that best suits your style, your book, and your thesis:***

***your* THESIS about the book**

A good review states its overall argument about the book in its thesis sentence(s).

For example: “The author has written an intriguing and readable study about the origins of the Spanish-American War but fails to provide adequate evidence to support her argument.” This statement tells the reader that the entire review centers on and supports/develops this evaluation (or argument).

an explanation of book’s THESIS & EVIDENCE

State and elaborate:

- A. the **book’s thesis** and **supporting arguments and evidence**.
- B. the author’s **methodology**.
- C. **your assessment** of each. (Does not have to be a separate sentence; work into your comments about (A) and (B) using adjectives and adverbs, e.g.,

“In her **thought-provoking** study of George Washington’s presidential successes, the author uses **newly available** sources to support her assertion that his accomplishments were the result of three character traits The recently released letters of Washington’s aide were written during Washington’s first term and focus on”

HINT: use the book’s introduction and preface to help you determine the information you need.

an evaluation of the author’s SOURCES/RESEARCH

SOURCES: Consider type, quality, and use of sources (keeping in mind the author’s purpose and intended audience, i.e., not all books require the same kind or number of sources).

FOR EXAMPLE:

- Considering what the author is trying to do, does he/she have adequate sources? (What sources *would* be adequate??)
- Does he/she use them to present a convincing argument?
- Does the author use only secondary sources? If so, is that approach suitable for the book?
- Is the author thorough in his/her use of primary sources? (What do *other* authors use?)

¹ “Critical” does not mean “negative.” It means a review that evaluates. It is quite possible for a review to contain no negative comments if the book has no flaws worth noting . . . or simply no flaws.

NOTES AND BIBLIOGRAPHY: Consider the use (and usefulness) of footnotes (or endnotes) and bibliography. If either is missing, does that affect the book (considering its purpose and the reader's needs)?

** Reminder: not every book needs or uses documentation in the same way.

an explanation of the book's ORGANIZATION & CONTENT

CONTENTS: Do NOT try to summarize every point in the book, but be sure to provide a clear sense of what the book's contents are. Who wants to read a book if they don't know what is in it? The information in your essay should be sufficient for someone to learn about a topic without having to read the book.

Your explanation of contents can be blended with other aspects of the book review (see *Deane sample*), but you probably need at least a page (all together or in different sections) to adequately cover content, in addition to references to content in other parts of the essay.

ORGANIZATION:

- Is the book arranged chronologically, topically, or some variation?
- Is this the best arrangement to accomplish the author's goal?
- Is its structure worth covering in detail (or is it best, for example, to simply say that it is arranged chronologically?)

Students often spend an entire paragraph listing topics or resort to a detailed chapter-by-chapter summary of a book's organization and contents. Readers find these approaches to be plodding and dull—and they are unnecessary if the reviewer understands the book that he/she is clarifying for readers.

** Reminder: Make your reader want to keep reading; do not bore your reader.

“EXTRAS”: Consider use (and usefulness) of index, appendices, photographs, maps, charts, etc.

- Are they necessary? Helpful? Used properly and well?
- If they are *not* used, should they be?

HINT: If some of the above parts of the book are not major ingredients or if there is nothing special to say about them, comment carefully, perhaps making your comments “in passing” as you focus on other elements. For example:

“A strength of Smith's book, which offers readers a minimal index and standard photographs, is its wisely selected and useful maps. These maps provide”

**And if the book has no index, for example, do not merely write, “The book has no index”; do not mention a fact about the book unless you have a point to make about it . . . and which you then make clear.

***relevant* information about the AUTHOR (such as profession, training, reputation, and other works, as well as [in some cases] politics, sex, religion)**

Who is the author? A historian? (or journalist or political scientist or participant?) It DOES matter.

→ Don't force irrelevant material into your review. That a scholar has eight children is not helpful in evaluating his expertise on the Franco-Prussian War, but that he has published four other books on nineteenth-century military history is.

Biographical information can often be found in a book's introduction, preface, or foreword or in book reviews. Also look at finding aids covered by Mr. Bales: take advantage of *Biography and Genealogy Index* and *Biography Index*, for example. Newspaper obituaries can sometimes be quite useful.

ADVICE: Consider whether the author is guided by values, biases, background, etc., rather than by facts and evidence. If so, comment and consider whether that fact affects the overall book—and thus should be part of your thesis. **(NOTE: Having an opinion/thesis/argument based on solid research is NOT being biased.)**

***relevant* information about the BOOK (e.g., when it was first published, what edition you are reviewing [*if other than first*], whether the book is unique in its field, how it compares to other works, which works supplement it and vice versa)**

HISTORIOGRAPHY: Demonstrate wherever possible your familiarity with the other works on your book's topic, how the book's interpretation compares with others on the same or related topic, and how your book contributes to the literature. The book does not exist in a vacuum.

The preface/foreword/introduction and bibliographic essay of a book can provide useful historiographic information. So, too, can other books on the topic and book reviews.

As always, do not comment on a point unless you have a reason—which you make clear—for doing so.

comments on or analysis of the author's WRITING STYLE

- How readable is the book?
- Does the author have an easy-to-follow or vivid or overly complex or dull style?
- Does the style fit the book's intended audience?
- Does the style have any notable peculiarities (good or bad)?

NOTE: Generally the author's writing fits into a typical range and warrants no reference or comment.

If the style is so special (for the good or the bad) and can best be explained only through a sample, a short example can be useful.

Comments about style that do not warrant extended commentary are easy to work into various parts of the review. For example,

*"Through her **vivid and colorful** descriptions and in a style that appeals to all readers, the author makes her case that"*

whether (and to whom) you RECOMMEND the book and why

- Is it a book for someone new to its topic? For an expert? For the general population?
- Is it a book that is valuable but only if read after other books?
- ** Consider for whom the book was *intended*. Is that the correct audience for it?

Students often awkwardly end their book reviews with a sentence that begins, "This book is recommended for" This sentence is in passive voice, so that hurts, as does such a clichéd pronouncement. (Avoid another cliché: "in conclusion")

Why not make your recommendation in the review's FIRST sentence, essentially as part of your

thesis/argument? For example,

“John Doe’s study of the Battle of Fredericksburg, a well-researched book that belongs on the shelf of every historian but that is too scholarly and complex for most general readers, is the best of a series of outstanding works on this key Civil War campaign.”

***Note that this sentence does several things. It . . .

- 1) provides the review’s THESIS statement,
- 2) makes a recommendation,
- 3) mentions historiography, and
- 4) indicates major areas covered by the review.

ADDITIONAL INSTRUCTIONS

Do not **quote** at length, but whenever you quote, document with page numbers in parentheses. (See instructions on parenthetical notes.)

Otherwise, do *not* provide page numbers. You are reviewing a book, so your reader is aware that the information about the book comes from the book.

CLARIFICATION: This is one of those rare times when historians do NOT use footnotes/endnotes (except for certain journals). However, they provide page numbers but only for the words they quote, not for facts and ideas.

The **title** of your review must be the bibliographic entry for your book (in proper Chicago form), single-spaced.

Do not use **first person**.

See and use the CHECKLIST that you submitted with your secondary source analysis: margins, spacing, tense, punctuation, etc.

A book review is a **formal essay**. Treat it as such: introduction, focus, organization, conclusion, etc).

Highlight thesis statement and topic sentences.

****** Submit (separately from the book review) a page that includes only the thesis and topic statements. (See below.)

Follow syllabus instructions regarding **pledging** hard copy and Slack copy.

BY THE START OF CLASS ON MONDAY, March 18:

- ▶ 1) TURN IN **2** COPIES IN CLASS
- 2) By 5 p.m., SUBMIT AS A WORD DOCUMENT (NOT PDF or Google Doc) on SLACK to the two peer reviewers assigned to you AND to the instructor:

Title the attachment/file:

last name "book review" (without quote marks) short book title

e.g., Jones book review Ladies

(penalty for incorrect title)

e.g., Jones book review Manly

e.g., Jones book review Sex

e.g., Jones book review Hello

NOTE TO PEER REVIEWERS: if you do not receive the papers assigned to you by the deadline, you MUST inform the instructor immediately.

- 3) By 4 p.m., March 19, send peer reviews to the instructor on Slack.

** Do **NOT** send your review to the authors of the book reviews.

Title the peer review:

Author of book review "reviewed by" YOUR name

e.g., Tommy reviewed by Annie

- 4) MEET WITH THE INSTRUCTOR

PENALTIES:

Penalty for either late paper will be applied to rewrite.

Book reviews that are not a serious and complete effort to meet the assignment will be penalized, with the penalty applied to the rewrite.

Peer reviews that are not serious and complete efforts will affect the participation grade.

AT THE START OF CLASS ON MONDAY, March 25:

- ▶ TURN IN 1 COPY OF THE REVISED REVIEW

In a two-pocket folder --

along with:

-- first papers **and** peer reviews

-- the **SAME** checklist submitted with the secondary source analysis

-- all materials in folder returned with secondary source analysis

MAKE SURE TO FOLLOW DIRECTIONS REGARDING TITLE, DOCUMENTATION, LENGTH/SPACING, PLEDGE.

BY 11:59 P.M. ON MONDAY, March 25:

- ▶ SUBMIT A COPY TO THE INSTRUCTOR on SLACK

e.g., Jones book review Ladies rewrite

e.g., Jones book review Manly rewrite

e.g., Jones book review Sex rewrite

e.g., Jones book review Hello rewrite

- ▶ POST THE REWRITE ON YOUR WEBSITE.