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Writing a Book Review

Summary:

This resource discusses book reviews and how to write them.

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Book reviews typically evaluate recently-written works. They offer a brief description of the text's key points and often provide a short appraisal of the strengths and weaknesses of the work.

Readers sometimes confuse book reviews with book reports, but the two are not identical. Book reports commonly describe what happens in a work; their focus is primarily on giving an account of the major plot, characters, and/or main idea of the work. Most often, book reports are a K-12 assignment and range from 250 to 500 words. If you are looking to write a book report, please see the OWL resource, Writing a Book Report.

By contrast, book reviews are most often a college assignment, but they also appear in many professional works: magazines, newspapers, and academic journals. They typically range from 500-750 words, but may be longer or shorter. A book review gives readers a sneak peek at what a book is like, whether or not the reviewer enjoyed it, and details on purchasing the book.

Before You Read

Before you begin to read, consider the elements you will need to be included in your review. The following items may help:

- **Author:** Who is the author? What else has s/he written? Has this author won any awards? What is the author's typical style?
- **Genre:** What type of book is this: fiction, nonfiction, romance, poetry, youth fiction, etc.? Who is the intended audience for this work? What is the purpose of the work?
- **Title:** Where does the title fit in? How is it applied in the work? Does it adequately encapsulate the message of the text? Is it interesting? Uninteresting?
- **Preface/Introduction/Table of Contents:** Does the author provide any revealing information about the text in the preface/introduction? Does a "guest author" provide the

introduction? What judgments or preconceptions do the author and/or “guest author” provide? How is the book arranged: sections, chapters?

- **Book Jacket/Cover/Printing:** Book jackets are like mini-reviews. Does the book jacket provide any interesting details or spark your interest in some way? Are there pictures, maps, or graphs? Do the binding, page cut, or typescript contribute or take away from the work?

As You Read

As you read, determine how you will structure the summary portion or background structure of your review. Be ready to take notes on the book’s key points, characters, and/or themes.

- **Characters:** Are there characters in the work? Who are the principal characters? How do they affect the story? Do you empathize with them?
- **Themes/Motifs/Style:** What themes or motifs stand out? How do they contribute to the work? Are they effective or not? How would you describe this author’s particular style? Is it accessible to all readers or just some?
- **Argument:** How is the work’s argument set up? What support does the author give for her/findings? Does the work fulfill its purpose/support its argument?
- **Key Ideas:** What is the main idea of the work? What makes it good, different, or groundbreaking?
- **Quotes:** What quotes stand out? How can you demonstrate the author’s talent or the feel of the book through a quote?

When You Are Ready to Write

Begin with a short summary or background of the work, but do not give too much away. Many reviews limit themselves only to the first couple of chapters or lead the reader up to the rising action of the work. Reviewers of nonfiction texts will provide the basic idea of the book’s argument without too much detailed.

The final portion of your review will detail your opinion of the work. When you are ready to begin your review, consider the following:

- **Establish a Background, Remember your Audience:** Remember that your audience has not read the work; with this in mind, be sure to introduce characters and principals carefully and deliberately. What kind of summary can you provide of the main points or main characters that will help your readers gauge their interest? Does the author’s text adequately reach the intended audience? Will some readers be lost or find the text too easy?
- **Minor principals/characters:** Deal only with the most pressing issues in the book. You will not be able to cover every character or idea. What principals/characters did you agree or disagree with? What other things might the author have researched or considered?
- **Organize:** The purpose of the review is to critically evaluate the text, not just inform the readers about it. Leave plenty room for your evaluation by ensuring that your summary is brief. Determine what kind of balance to strike between your summary information and your evaluation. If you are writing your review for a class, ask your instructor. Often the ratio is half and half.
- **Your Evaluation:** Choose one or a few points to discuss about the book. What worked well for you? How does this work compare with others by the same author or other books in

the same genre? What major themes, motifs, or terms does the book introduce, and how effective are they? Did the book appeal to you on an emotional or logical way?

- **Publisher/Price:** Most book reviews include the publisher and price of the book at the end of the article. Some reviews also include the year published and ISBN.

Revising

When making the final touches to your review, carefully verify the following:

- Double-check the spelling of the author name(s), character names, special terms, and publisher.
 - Try to read from the vantage point of your audience. Is there too much/enough summary? Does your argument about the text make sense?
 - Should you include direct quotes from the reading? Do they help support your arguments? Double-check your quotes for accuracy.
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