

## A Concise Guide to Writing a Critical Book Review

(Adapted from a handout used by the University of Alberta Library:  
[http://libits.library.ualberta.ca/library\\_html/help/pathfinders/book\\_review.html](http://libits.library.ualberta.ca/library_html/help/pathfinders/book_review.html))

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A critical book review, as well as giving information about a book, expresses an opinion on the book. An essential element of a critical review is the expression of an evaluative judgement on the quality, meaning and significance of the book. It includes a statement of what the author has tried to do, evaluates how well (in the opinion of the reviewer) the author has succeeded, and presents evidence to support this evaluation. Three aspects that must be covered by a critical book review are:

1. **Contents** - what is said in the book. (Note: this is not a summary of contents, but a statement describing the contents.)
2. **Style** - how it is said
3. **Assessment** - a comment on the significance of what is said.

### Suggested steps in writing a critical book review:

1. **Pick a book that has substance and standing.** Use major bibliographies in your area to determine what are the most important books and most influential publishers; while a book published by Fripp and Frapp of Podunk, SD, may be very valuable, usually good authors seek major publishers first, and most (but not all) good books are published by major houses. Using the annotated bibliographies that appear annually in most fields can help you determine what are important books and what are tangential ones. You want an important book.
2. **Get to know the work** by a careful reading of the book; and by the opinions of others. (Use the resources of the library to find other critical reviews.) In getting to know the book, use all the information within the book itself. Look at the title page; is there a sub-title? Note when the book was first published. Is there a table of contents, or chapter headings? If so, use these as an orientation to the organization and contents of the book. If a bibliography is present, give it careful scrutiny to determine what may have contributed to the author's conclusions. Also consider the quality and veracity of these sources. Always read the preface or introduction for statements about the book's intentions and/or limitations. As you read, take notes and flag passages that you feel are illustrative of the purpose, theme and style of the work. Note strengths as well as weaknesses.
3. **Establish the "thesis" of the review.** Think about what the main point of your criticism will be. In establishing the main point of criticism consider the author's intention in writing the book and whether this was achieved. A good critical book review is focused around *your* opinion of the book—that opinion is your thesis.
4. **Make a preliminary outline.** Consult notes made while reading the book. Assemble these notes around the main point to be made in the review. Decide on the best order of presenting the criticism for clarity and emphasis.
5. **In your first draft,** include statements about the author's previous works and background; his or her cultural, scientific, religious, and political affiliation; and reputation. Also state the author's purpose and occasion for writing the book, as stated or implied in the preface or text. Pay particular attention to the opening paragraph.

## Organization

### Starting Out

Begin the paper with a block, double-spaced, on the left-hand side that has your name, the class name, the instructor's name, and the date. Double space down, and type (without quotation marks) "Review of Underlined or Italicized Title of Book by Author Name (City of publication: Publisher, year of publication). This heading and the rest of the critical review are double-spaced.

#### **Some suggestions on your introduction:**

- describe the author's purpose for writing the book and his or her qualifications
- state the main point of criticism about the book
- describe the genre or group to which the work belongs
- give the historical background of the work
- comment on the significance of the work

For the body of the review, follow the preliminary outline, assembling and if necessary, rearranging arguments for the most logical presentation. Use quotation marks or indents to set off any quoted material. In the conclusion restate or sum up your thesis. If possible leave some time before the next step.

### Editing and Polishing

1. **Revise the first draft.** Read through and correct errors as they are found. Reading aloud is helpful to show up any awkwardness of construction. At this point verify quotations for accuracy and make sure they are properly indicated. Check again for logical presentation and, if necessary, rearrange statements and/or make major revisions. Your rough draft is finished when you are ready to make a final copy from it. This is a good point to visit the Writing Center.
2. **Copy over and document sources.** Check uncertain spelling as you copy. Signal the beginning of each source use with a signal phrase like "Smith contends" or "According to Jones". Document quotations and specific paraphrases with a parenthetical citation at the end of the source giving the author's name and the page number. Passages quoted from the work as well as passages referred to in the work must be documented. Ideas borrowed or quoted from other sources must also be properly acknowledged in MLA fashion, and these must also be listed on a separate Works Cited page at the end of the review.
3. **Proofread scrupulously and slowly** some time (at least 2 hours is best) after you print the paper out. This allows your short-term memory to clear and lets you proofread more accurately. If there is no time to reprint a corrected review, make corrections neatly with black ink and correction fluid.

If you want to see some good critical reviews, try this website:

<http://www.uccs.edu/~history/samples/samples.html> and look at the papers by Cowen, Culbert, Johnson, Gunn, and Harvey. They're in the discipline of history but they are excellent examples.