

DEPARTMENT OF HISTORY AND CLASSICS

**GUIDELINES FOR WRITING A HISTORICAL BOOK REVIEW**

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**INTRODUCTION**

A book review is much more than a book report. Rather than a simple summary of a book's contents, a review is a critical essay evaluating a historical work. Its purpose is not to prove that you read the book—although you still need to do that—but to show that you can think critically about what you read. You should write a coherent analysis of the book, illustrating its strengths and weaknesses.

You can see examples of reviews in virtually any historical journal, which may help you to write your own paper. Reviews are not simply busywork, but a vital part of academic life, as you will see in the journals. Most professors regularly read and write reviews to find interesting books, stay informed of new work, and ensure that their voices continue to be heard.

A book review requires a lot of thought and effort, which this handout will help you with. The process can be broken into three main stages: as you read; as you prepare to write; and, as you write. Within each stage there are a series of questions and factors to consider as you work on your review. Many of these issues are interrelated, however, in this guide they are broken up to make them easier to understand.

**STAGE 1: AS YOU READ**

You should consider the following issues while you are reading the book to help you better evaluate it. Make notes as you read, so you don't forget your observations or have to go back and hunt out references.

**a) Purpose:** What was the author's intent behind the book? Did she or he state it explicitly, or did you have to infer it? Does the book have a clear central thesis?

**b) Interpretation:** One of the key parts of writing history is interpreting what happened, drawing connections, and explaining the significance of events. How does the author do this? Does she or he make explicit use of a mode of analysis or theory, or are the bases of analysis implied, "common sense" ideas? Do you think the author's interpretations are logical and consistent? Do they help you understand

better or do they obscure more than they clarify? Can you think of alternative ways to explain what happened or analyze developments?

**c) Contextualization:** How well does the author explain the wider context of the events or developments that he or she is discussing? Is the book narrowly focused or does the author try to connect to wider developments? Does the focus make sense to you? Does it help you better understand what happened?

**d) Silences:** What does the author omit, exclude, or overlook? Does that weaken the book? Does this help you understand the author's purpose?

**e) Style:** Is the book well written? Is it easy to understand? Does it flow well? Is the writing dense and heavy with jargon, making it hard to grasp? Does the author show a flair that goes beyond simple communication? Does the writing make the book more effective or more interesting?

**f) Sources:** What kind of sources does the author use? Are they mainly published documents, or do they include archival records? Does the author draw on other materials such as novels, interviews, or artwork? Do you think he or she has tapped all the major sources available or are there omissions?

**g) Fit:** How does the book relate to other historical literature? Does the book break new ground or advance knowledge in significant ways? Does it modify common understandings, or does it reiterate and uphold accepted views? Does it bring a new methodology or theoretical approach to the topic? Is it a contentious work? If it is an older book, was it controversial when it was published? Have the author's ideas been widely accepted since then? Why or why not?

You may have to do some additional reading to answer these questions. Ask your instructor what she or he expects, but you should also consider whether you know enough about the field to write an effective review. Academic journals in relevant areas will be very helpful; you should look at the book reviews and substantive articles. You can identify the journals from the library catalogue, and individual articles from the databases linked to the library home page.

**h) Author's background:** Many professors will expect you to look into the author's qualifications and experience – you should check with your instructor if this is not clear. The web and the library catalogue, especially the publication databases, are invaluable tools. Use them to explore what other works the author has published, and what topics they addressed. Is he or she a young scholar, or an established one? Is the author working on a new topic, or in an area where he or she has a lot of experience?

## **STAGE 2: AS YOU PREPARE TO WRITE**

Once you've read the book and thought about it, you should start developing the main parts of your review before you start writing. Think about the following elements and how to include them in your essay. Then you should make a plan laying out the main points in the introduction, body, and conclusion of your paper.

**a) Major Points:** Look back through your notes to pull out your most important observations; this may help you to find a central argument or theme for your review.

As you think about the main points that you want to make, consider what would be the most effective order in which to present them. You should also think about how you will support your points, as you do in any other essay. Look for specific examples and short effective quotes that could illustrate your ideas, or think about how to summarize sections of the book to support your argument. You need to substantiate and illustrate any claims that you make.

**b) Theme:** Your review needs a central argument, like any academic essay. How can you sum up your evaluation of the book, providing a theme around which you can organize your review? How can you use this central argument in your introduction and conclusion?

**c) Profile:** As part of your review, you should provide a brief synopsis of the book's main argument and themes. This will be roughly one paragraph in length and should not be a summary of the different sections or chapters. Rather you should concentrate on the author's central intention behind the book to find an effective way to sum up the work for your reader.

### **STAGE 3: AS YOU WRITE**

Your review is a short critical essay. As you write and edit your paper, you should ensure that you include the following:

**a)** A brief, effective **introduction** that lays out the theme or central argument of your review.

**b)** A concise **profile** of the book. Most reviewers make this the second paragraph of the review, although you can include it elsewhere. It should not be the introduction.

**c)** The **body** of the essay should be a series of observations about the book, pointing out its strengths and weaknesses, as well as how it fits into the wider literature. Your ideas should flow in a logical order and be connected to one another. Don't just jumble ideas together; look for a way to organize your ideas effectively.

**d)** A short **conclusion** summing up your main ideas. Ideally it should leave your reader with something to reflect on.

**e)** Acceptable styles for **citations** vary widely. Check with your instructor to see which format he or she prefers.

**f)** Your review should be **grammatical and clear**. Read it over carefully before you print the final copy. Don't trust the computer's spell check and grammar check functions (they will miss many mistakes and will not catch wrong words spelled correctly).

### **MULTI-BOOK REVIEW**

Most reviews require you to read and evaluate a single book. However, sometimes you'll be asked to read two or more works. The basic tasks in a multi-book review are the same, but you also have to compare the books and consider their strengths and weaknesses in relation to each other. These essays are usually longer than a review of a single book.