

Book Review Guidelines

A book review describes, analyzes and evaluates. The review conveys an opinion, supporting it with evidence from the book.

Before reading, consider:

- Title - What does it suggest?
- Preface or Introduction - Provides important information about the author's intentions or the scope of the book. Can you identify any limitations? Has the author ignored important aspects of the subject?
- Table of Contents - Shows how the book's organized -- main ideas, how they're developed (chronologically, topically, etc.)

Points to ponder as you read the *entire* book:

- What's the general field or genre? Does the book fit?
- From what point of view is the book written?
- Do you agree or disagree with the author's point of view?
- Make notes as you read, passages to quote in your review.
- Can you follow the author's thesis, "common thread"?
- What is the author's style? Formal? Informal? Suitable for the intended audience?
- Are concepts well defined? Is the language clear and convincing? Are the ideas developed? What areas are covered, not covered? How accurate is the information?
- Is the author's concluding chapter, the summary, convincing?
- If there are footnotes, do they provide important information? Do they clarify or extend points made in the text?
- If relevant, make note of the book's format - layout, binding, etc. Are there maps, illustrations? Are they helpful?
- Is the index accurate? What sources did the author use -- primary, secondary? Make note of important omissions.
- What did the book accomplish? Is more work needed? Compare the book to others by this author, or books in this field by other authors. (Use the books listed in the bibliography.)

Writing the Review:

- Include title, author, place, publisher, publication date, edition, pages, special features (maps, etc.), price, ISBN.
- Hook the reader with your opening sentence. Set the tone of the review. Be familiar with the guidelines -- some editors want plot summaries; others don't. Some want you to say outright if you recommend a book, but not others.
- Review the book you read -- not the book you wish the author had written.
 - **What is the structure of the book?** Are the chapters organized chronologically, thematically, by group of historical actors, from general to specific, or in some other way? How does the structure of the work enhance or detract from the argument?
- If this is the best book you have ever read, say so -- and why. If it's merely another nice book, say so.
- Lay out an author's argument, and most importantly, critique the historical argument.
 - **Write a few sentences about the author's approach or genre of history.** Is the focus on gender? Class? Race? Politics? Culture? Labor? Law? Something else? A combination? If you can identify the type of history the historian has written, it will be easier to determine the historical argument the author is making.
 - **Summarize the author's subject and argument.**
 - In a few sentences, describe the time period, major events, geographical scope and group or groups of people who are being investigated in the book. Why has the author chosen the starting and ending dates of the book's narrative? Next, discover the major thesis or theses of the book, the argument(s) that the author makes and attempts to support with evidence. These are usually, but not always, presented in a book's introduction. It might help to look for the major question that the author is attempting to answer and then try to write his or her answer to that question in a sentence or two. Sometimes there is a broad argument supported by a series of supporting arguments. It is not always easy to discern the main argument but this is the most important part of your book review.

- **Is the argument convincing as a whole?**
 - Is there a particular place where it breaks down? Why? Is there a particular element that works best? Why? Would you recommend this book to others, and if so, for whom is it appropriate? General readers? Undergraduates? Graduates and specialists in this historical subject? Why? Would you put any qualifications on that recommendation?
- Include information about the author-- reputation, qualifications, etc. -- anything relevant to the book and the author's authority.
 - What academic discipline was the author trained in? What other books, articles, or conference papers has s/he written? How does this book relate to or follow from the previous work of the author? Has the author or this book won any awards? This information helps you understand the author's argument and critique the book.
- Think about the person reading your review. Is this a librarian buying books for a collection? A parent who wants a good read-aloud? Is the review for readers looking for information about a particular topic, or for readers searching for a good read?
- Your conclusion should summarize, perhaps include a final assessment. Do not introduce new material at this point.
- To gain perspective, allow time before revising. Please have a history faculty member or CLE writing tutor proofread your work.