How to Write a Book Review

A book review is both a description and an evaluation of a book. It should focus on the book’s purpose, contents, and authority.

There are two approaches to book reviewing: the descriptive and the critical.

A descriptive review is one in which the writer, without over-enthusiasm or exaggeration, gives the essential information about a book. This is done by description and exposition, by stating the perceived aims and purposes of the author, and by quoting passages from the text.

A critical review is one in which the writer describes and evaluates the book, in terms of accepted literary and historical standards, and supports this evaluation from the text.

Two things a review must know to write a critical review:
1. The work being reviewed
2. The requirements of the genre to which the work belongs (novel, short story, biography, poetry, etc.)

Knowledge of the work demands not only an attempt to understand what the author’s purpose is and how the component parts of the work contribute to that purpose, but some knowledge of the of the author—his/her nationality, time period, other works etc.

Knowledge of the genre means understanding the art form and how it functions. Without such understanding, the reviewer has no historical or literary standard upon which to base his/her evaluation.

Essentials of a Book Review
1. Description, not a summary, of the book. Sufficient description should be given so that the reader, as he reads the review, will have some understanding of the author’s thoughts.
2. Something about, not a biography of, the author. Biographical information should be relevant to the subject of the review and enhance the reader’s understanding of the work under discussion.
3. An appraisal, preferably indirect, through description and exposition and based on the aims and purposes of the author. While a critical review is a statement of opinion, it must be considered judgment including:
A statement of the reviewer’s understanding of the author’s purpose how well the reviewer feels the author’s purpose has been achieved evidence to support the reviewer’s judgment of the author’s achievement.
Preliminary Steps to Writing a Book Review

Scan the Book’s Preliminaries
Before beginning to read, consider the following:

- Title - What does the title suggest?
- Preface provides important information on the author’s purpose in writing the book and will help you to determine the success of the work.
- Table of Contents - Tells you how the book is organized and will aid in determining the author’s main ideas and how they are developed-chronologically, topically, etc.

Read the Text

Record impressions as you read and note effective passages for quoting. Keep these questions in mind:

1. What is the general field or genre, and how does the book fit into it? (Use outside sources to familiarize yourself with the field, if necessary.)

2. From what point of view is the work written?

3. What is the author’s style? Is it formal or informal? Does it suit the intended audience? If a work of fiction, what literary devices does the author use?

4. Are concepts clearly defined? How well are the author’s ideas developed? What areas are covered/not covered? Why? This helps to establish the books authority.

5. If a work is fiction, make notes on such elements as characters, plot, and setting, and how they relate to the theme of the book. How does the author delineate his characters? How do they develop? What is the plot structure?

6. How accurate is the information in the book? Check outside sources if necessary.

7. If relevant, make note of the book’s format-layout, binding, typography, etc. Are there maps, illustrations? Do they aid understanding?

8. Check the back matter. Is the index accurate? What sources did the author use-primary or secondary? How does he make use of them? Make note of important omissions.
9. Finally, what has the book accomplished? Is further work needed? Compare the book to others by this author or by others. (Use the listing in the bibliography.)

**Consult Additional Sources**