



HPS352 Writing a Book Review

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Resources for Writing Book Reviews

- **HPS352 Book Review Guide:**
<http://uoft.me/hps352/>
- **Vic College Writing Centre:**
http://www.vic.utoronto.ca/students/tutorialservices/writing_centre.htm.

The Purpose of Writing Book Reviews

- Book reviews are publications that play an important part in academic communication (or scholarly conversation).
- Scholarly communication involves discussion and exchange of ideas between academics.
- Reviewing others scholars' books and publishing them as book reviews is a part of this process.

Characteristics of Book Reviews

- Book reviews are a special form of academic writing. A good book review is more than just a mere listing or summary of the book's content chapter by chapter.
- Book reviews have their own distinct structures with familiar components.
- They consist of a brief description of the text's key points and provide a short appraisal of the strengths and weaknesses of the work under evaluation.

Some Key Features of an Excellent Book Review

- Identifies the strengths and weaknesses of the arguments presented in the work.
- Gives a balanced, critical evaluation of the text.
- Is well written, succinct and informative.
- Makes people want to buy the book (or not).
- Evaluates the contribution of the text and sets the work in a larger, broader context of the discipline.
- Involves the reader in the discussion.

Author, Subject Matter, Time Frame: Initial Assessment

- **Book cover/jacket/printing:** book jackets are like mini-reviews and often include the author's short biographical description. Does the book jacket provide any interesting details or spark your interest in some way? Are there pictures, maps, graphs or other illustrations? What is their purpose?
- **Title page** lists the title, subtitle, author, and the publisher. What do the title and the subtitle of the book suggest?

Author, Subject Matter, Time Frame: Initial Assessment

- **Preface** usually gives the author's purpose in writing and states the scope of the book.
- **Introduction** gives a general account of the subject matter of the book.
- **Table of contents** is a list of the titles of the chapters in the order in which they appear in the book. The chapter headings give, in a general way, the information to be found in each chapter. Taken as a whole, it provides an overview of the topics examined in the book.

Author, Subject Matter, Time Frame: Initial Assessment

- **Index** (in the back of the book) alphabetically lists the topics, events, and people described in the book—it gives an excellent snapshot of the subject matter.
- Ensure that your summary of the content and the subject matter is *brief* and leave plenty of room for your *critical evaluation* of the text.
- The purpose of the review is to critically analyze the text, not just inform the readers about its existence.

The Author, the Editor & the Publisher

- What is the author's educational background? What credentials qualify him to write on this topic? What else has he written?
- Search the library catalogue by author's name or consult the author's faculty profile (look for sections entitled "research" or "publications").
- If the book is part of a series, who is the editor? What does it tell me about the nature of this book?

Assessment of the Book's Central Claims

- Don't read looking only or primarily for information; do read looking for ways of thinking about the subject matter.
- What is the purpose of this book? What is the author's central concept?
- What are the types of questions and issues that the author discusses in the book?
- What seems to be the general progression of ideas in this book?

Assessment of the Book's Central Claims

- Is the author trying to advance a particular position?
- Is there a clearly supported argument or is the argument inflammatory and unsupported?
- Determine how the various stages in the argument are built up in groups of related paragraphs.

Assessment of the Book's Central Claims

- Distinguish the kinds of reasoning the text employs. What concepts are defined and used? Does the text appeal to a theory or theories? Is any specific methodology laid out?
- If there is an appeal to a particular concept, theory, or method, how is that concept, theory, or method then used to organize and interpret the cited sources? You might also examine how the text is organized: how has the author analyzed (broken down) the material?

Assessment of the Book's Central Claims

- Examine the controversies, issues, and questions that the author discusses in the book—how does he or she address and explore them?
- Finally, how does the text reach its conclusions?
- Read carefully the concluding chapter, paragraphs or section. What does the author's overall purpose seem to be?

Examination of the Types of Evidence

- What are the ideas that are central to the main thesis or argument?
- What are the lines of thinking that are evident in the text?
- Is a bibliography or works cited list included?
- What types of sources does the author rely on, primary, secondary or both to back up his points? Biographical or historical accounts? Literary analysis?

Examination of the Types of Evidence

- Most importantly, how is the evidence (derived from the sources) used to demonstrate and argue the thesis?
- Are there alternative ways of arguing from the same sources?
- Does the author show awareness of them?
- In what respect does the author agree or disagree with them?

Analysis of the Book's Significance & Audience

- Analyze the book's significance in relation to the topic and the discipline.
- Where does it fit in the discipline? How does it contribute to the existing research on the topic?
- Does it analyze, critique, or cite any of the thinkers you have encountered in the class discussion, the assigned readings or other courses?

Analysis of the Book's Significance & Audience

- What theoretical issues and topics for further discussion does the work raise?
- What is the particular type of audience who would benefit from reading this book? And why would they read it? For what purpose?