

How to Write an Academic Book Review

As with writing essays, there is no simple formula for writing good academic book reviews. Reviews are usually brief (500 – 1000 words) and provide some scope for you to develop your writing style.

THE trick to writing effective book reviews is being able to comment on the text as a whole piece of work, and being able to succinctly summarise the main content without losing meaning. So in general you need to:

- Get an understanding of the essential purpose and overall thread of the book
- Provide an accurate summary of content
- Offer some critical judgement on parts and the whole of the book.

Ideally, you should also be able to comment on where the book fits into a bigger body of literature on the same subject, but this is not always possible if you are new to a discipline area.

What to include

A book review should include all of the following:

- 1 Statements about what the author is attempting to achieve by writing the book
- 2 A brief summary of what the book covers
- 3 An evaluation of whether the author achieves what he or she sets out to achieve
- 4 Statements about where the book fits into its field

1 Statements about what the author is attempting to achieve by writing the book

Authors almost always include statements about why they have written an academic book and what they hope to achieve. These statements can usually be found in prefaces, and/or introductions, and in conclusions. Try to discover if the author is starting from a particular theoretical or ideological base, developing a particular argument, using a particular method to explore an issue, or a combination of these. Try to provide the academic context in which the book has been written.

2 A brief summary of what the book covers

Outline the main sections or components that develop the text. Don't try to cover everything. A summary of key development is far more useful than a blow-by-blow account of chapters. Aim to be succinct and accurate. Your summary should only take up one of two paragraphs.

3 An evaluation of whether the author achieves what he or she sets out to achieve

Having identified the author's intentions, you are now in a position to judge whether he or she achieves them. This section forms the body of the book review. Support your arguments with examples from the book, but mostly put these into your own words. You might want to include a few direct quotations for important points, but keep these short and to the point, and remember to reference them accurately. You can comment on the author's style and presentation in this section. Resist the temptation to digress into your own subject knowledge or to suggest that the author should have written a completely different book. Keep to the job at hand.

4 Statements about where the book fits into its field

This is probably difficult to do if you are new to the subject and/or discipline. But, if you are in a position to comment on how the book does or does not make a contribution to the subject area, go ahead.

How to structure a review

Here is one suggestion for a structure, taken from Cuba (1993). It includes all of the items outlined above.

- 1** An introductory paragraph identifying the work and its author, presenting the thesis of the book, and giving some indication of whether the author achieves the stated purpose of the book.
- 2** A paragraph or two summarising the book and relating it (where possible) to other books in the field.
- 3** A paragraph noting the strengths of the book (if any).
- 4** A paragraph noting the weaknesses of the book (if any).
- 5** A concluding paragraph that conveys, on balance, your assessment of the strengths and weaknesses of the book (does the book succeed in fulfilling its purpose?)

References and further reading:

Cuba, L. (1993) *A short guide to writing about social science*. New York: Harper Collins.