
UNIT 5 HOW TO WRITE A GOOD REVIEW

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5.0 AIMS

In this unit we shall discuss the evaluation (i.e. reviewing) of a book in terms of subject, relevance, and style. After reading this unit, you should be able to write a review that will tell the reader:

- whether the subject — or the field to which the book belongs — is important;
- what the content of the book is and how soon it might become dated;
- whether the book is better than the other related books on the subject;
- how relevant the book is in the context of the existing body of knowledge and the nature of readership;
- the author's ideological stance; and
- comment upon the various ingredients of style viz. clarity, directness, cogency and pithiness.

5.1 INTRODUCTION

We discussed in Unit 4 the characteristics of a good review and reviewer. In this Unit we shall tell you how to write a good review.

To most publishers, books are nothing more than goods on sale — toothpaste, biscuits, or bicycles. Perhaps commercial compulsions are such! What sells most is the best — even if it caters to the dark, negative or lower side of human nature. Some authors, who are not willing to accept penury as part of their creative life, write 'cheap' books, which sell fast on footpaths and railway platforms, on a 'cash down' basis; publishers buy the copyright of those books for a lumpsum and make lots of money.

It is against this background that we should understand the reviewer's role. A reviewer's responsibility towards society is slightly more than that of an author. He should evaluate both carefully and responsibly.

We have attempted to introduce you to some of the kinds of reviews currently published. These may only serve to introduce the reader to a book, or analyse the contents of the book or offer a critical, comparative assessment. Then we have gone on the actual preparation for writing — reading closely, getting acquainted with other books on the subject etc. How to structure your review and what all to keep in mind while writing a review are also explained. Keep in mind the fact that the review must be readable and yet informative and you will not go wrong.

5.2 KINDS OF BOOK REVIEWS

Books can be reviewed in a variety of styles but for the same discussion we have covered the styles under three headings.

- introductory
- analytical
- critical or comparative

5.2.1 Introductory

As the name suggests, this is merely to introduce the book to the reader. You may cover what the book is about, why it is important, is it worth buying keeping in view the other books on the subject, its price, get-up etc. You are not even expected attempt a detailed analysis or critical look at the book. It would be writing for the lay reader who is merely glancing at the titles with a view to knowing about the latest publication.

5.2.2 Analytical

This review will need more effort on your part. You will see whether the contents of the book are worth the reader's effort and time (and money). You will have to discuss whether it book is relevant, covers new areas, and is interesting and readable apart from considering its general get-up and pricing. You have to look at the various parts (chapters) of the book structure, its language and so forth.

5.2.3 Critical or Comparative

A critical or comparative review means that you will have to be aware of the other books published on the subject. You will have to look at those books as well when you review the book instruction. This means that you will have to keep up with the publications — reading reviews, visiting bookstores, libraries etc. You cannot write such a review without adequate preparation. We shall discuss the process of preparation and writing later on in this unit.

To sum up then, your review should be such that the reader is helped to decide whether to buy the book or not, or at least whether to read the book at all.

5.3 PREPARATION FOR WRITING

By now you must have realized that writing a review is not merely a matter of looking at the blurb of the book, flipping through the pages and then writing it out. As a responsible reviewer, you will have to make some preparations for writing the review.

5.3.1 Reading Closely

Firstly, the honest thing will be to read the book. Read it from cover to cover, closely. See what the author is claiming to be doing and check whether he has done it. Is he telling you how to cook a five course dinner as he promised or is he taking short-cuts — suggesting you go and buy the basic meal and then merely telling you of the decorations.

Is the argument carried through till the end? If he began by taking a certain position on the issue of women's rights, did he keep to the central idea or did he merely pad up the review by using statistics and facts collected by someone else?

Are his conclusions valid? Or is he avoiding committing himself to an issue? For instance, if his cover claimed that the book is an expose of the blackmarket forces, has he given names, facts, figures or has he cleverly said “names have been changed to protect the privacy of individuals”.

5.3.2 Studying the Various Aspects

Look at the subject, its relevance and its style. There are the three aspects of any book that you must cover in your review.

What is the book about? The **thesis** or the **central argument** must be clearly identified. Is the book merely a “collection of critical essays” or is there a central focus? Tell the reader whether the book is merely a hotch-potch collection or whether the book is a “collection of critical essays” on the issue of exploitation of child labourers (or salt-miners or bonded labourers...). You will have to be sure yourself in order to be able to commit yourself so you will find that you are reading closely anyway and looking at the book objectively.

Next you will have to consider **relevance**. Is the book of any use to the reader, given his interests, the geographical location of the place where the book is being reviewed, the season, the political climate, the economic scenario and so on. For example, a book on how to ski if published in the tropics is obviously irrelevant. A book on Western fashions is of no use to a rural reader. Is it any use to speculate on life on the moon — we **already** know there isn't.

Style: You will read more about later on in this unit (5.4.4). Generally speaking, style is the way the author of the reviewed book has handled the language and sentence structure.

5.3.3 Acquaintance with other works on the subject

The best of book reviews ‘place’ the book with precision in the context of the literature available on the subject. Not uncommon are instances where a reviewer, when in doubt about other books in the field, consults experts in the field before passing his verdict; for the verdict should be just, and based on unquestionable principles or criteria.

He should take note of the previous works by the same author. In the case of creative writing — fiction, short stories, poetry, drama etc. — the reviewer has another task. In the context of the author's previous work, he must judge what development has occurred in his handling of the theme, language and artistic form, and in which direction his art is moving. Even when it is a scholarly work, the reviewer has to take note of the development of the author's ideas, attitudes, and modes of presentation of his material. A reader would certainly expect the reviewer to be well-read in the author's previous work and be able to trace the author's artistic or intellectual development, if any.

Activity 1

Here are extracts from 2 book reviews in which the criticism goes beyond an appraisal of the book itself. Read each and answer the following questions:

- Does the review give you enough information as regards the trends, the content and the contribution of the book to the main body of knowledge?
- Does the reviewer have any fixed ideas which colour his review and make it biased?

(50 words each for parts (a) and (b))

- Most of our fiction writers are obsessed with the ‘social purpose’ of their creations. They are goaded by the zeal to reform their society. They are victims of their own conviction that their experiences are so profound and universal that they must not be wasted in silence. Fine are these noble aims. But how many of them keep expanding the areas of experiences? How widely and intensely do they live, and explore the many changing layers of what we refer to obliquely as ‘realities’ ‘life’, ‘nature’, ‘culture’, and so on? And finally, why use the so-called message as a heavy roller which only flattens out the many creases and undulations that make a short story exciting? Why this imposition?
- The great leeway and licence allowed in writing poetry and fiction (without

[illegible]

We have been talking so far about the three kinds of book reviews and the preparations you should make before writing the review. Coming then to the review proper, the actual writing out of the review, this is how you should go about it. This is the normal format of the lead (or first part):

5.4.1 Introduce the BBook and Writer

Having given this format, you should normally talk about the book's contents (and the author):

The author has tried to discover modern commercial concepts in the “Mahabharata” (beginning of review of *Commerce in Mahabharata* in *Indian Book Chronicle*, January 1989). Here the author is not discussed.

Another reviewer in the same *Chronicle* says of *The Coming of the Devi* that it “deals with the tribal socio-religious reform movement which had covered ...” and goes on to “Dr. Hardiman (author) underwent the rigours of social anthropologists. He visited adivasi villages, studied their life...”. This information is helpful because then the reader can decide about the authenticity of what the author is writing.

5.4.2 Highlight Central Idea

Remember that the space available to a review is usually limited, given the high cost of publication of magazines and consequent pressure on space. The reader too usually wishes to know rightaway what the central idea of the book is

“The book under review is largely a tribute to the genius of the poet-hero who nourished his beloved — (*Indian Poetry*) and helpfully defined her before the outside world (a review of *Modern Indian Poetry in English* by Bruce King reviewed by I.K. Sharma in *Indian Book Chronicle*, January 1989).

By now you should have captured the reader’s interest so you should next give your own assessment.

5.4.3 Assess the Contents

Is the book good? Does it say anything new?

Book reviewing is done in two stages. First the Review Editor goes through the book, one of the scores submitted to him for reviewing. He has to screen it to see if it must be reviewed at all in his publication — space, after all, is very limited and hence valuable.

At the second stage, once a book has been considered fit to be reviewed, the reviewer enters. Here is a checklist of his criteria:

- What is the subject of the book?
- What is the aim of the book — is it to provide new knowledge or to fill in gaps in existing knowledge in the relevant area?
- What is the approach of the book? Is it merely a re-hash of existing information or does it provide fresh perspectives? (Remember books like *Was God an Astronaut?* and *The Tao of Physics*)
- How does it compare with one or two other similar (or dissimilar) books?
- What are the lacunae in the book itself?
- Are facts and figures given relevant and reliable? (You may compare them with other books on the subject)
- Are the conclusions or final evaluations made by the author innovative, confirmatory or do they supplement existing information?
- Finally, does the book fill a gap?
- How does it compare with other books as regards price, get up, availability in bookstores and libraries?

Activity 2

Now read the 3 reviews given below and compare them against the checklist. Has the reviewer touched upon these points?

(50 words each)

- a) **ON WAR:** The Second World War ended in 1945, but authors, historians, research scholars and readers have never ceased to be fascinated by it. Even after four decades we have numerous war books being published, many of them prestigious projects of the season. The British, Americans, Germans are all, perhaps, enamoured of history, for how else can one explain over two dozen titles on the Falklands War alone. Even the war in Korea, Congo and Vietnam inspired

some of the finest literary works comprising war accounts, weapons used, policies and strategies chalked out and fiction, as did the Russian march into Czechoslovakia and more recently, its presence in Afghanistan. Publishers in Britain went to the extent of launching a full illustrated series on the World War. Published on this day as the Commando series and war comics it is popular with readers of all ages.

Unfortunately, at home the picture is bleak. Since Independence, in a span of 21 years) India has been engaged in four wars (including the 1948 Indo-Pakistan conflict in Kashmir). But, so far, not a single authentic book or document has been published. The few that did appear were forgotten before they could find a place on library shelves.

In the next three to four months as many as 65 war titles will be released. This does not include fiction.

- b) **NATYA NIREEKSHANAM:** By Guru Chandrasekharan, Prathibha Nritha Kala Kendra, Trivandrum, Rs.124: reviewed in *The Hindu*, November 10, 1987.

The book is a compilation of the research work on Bharathanatyam by the author with a fellowship from the Department of Culture of the Government of India. Over the last several years, though the interest in dance has enhanced significantly not only among the connoisseurs but also among the laymen, literature on the subject especially in regional languages like Malayalam has really not been keep pace with the interest generated. Authentic writing on dance is essential not only for appreciation and understanding but also for the healthy growth of dance like any other art form. The author, who has made major contributions to the cause and revivalism of interest in the field of dance in Kerala through his performances and now in his early seventies after retirement, has lived up to the expectaitons through this book.

- c) **YESUVIN THOZHARGAL:** By Indira Parthasarathy, Tamizh Puthakalayam, 58 T.P. Koil St. Triplicane, Madras – 600005, Rs.20: reviewed in *The Hindu*, November 10, 1987.

Are there any trail-blazers among contemporary fiction writers who have had a more enriching exposure to a fast-changing social scene that the writers of an earlier generation? How sharp have been their perceptions? Efforts to discern a trend from a reading of the books now under notice may well start with **Yesuvin Thozargal** (Companions of Jesus) by Dr. R. Parthasarathy (better known to his readers as Indira Parthasarathy) who has put to excellent use his stay in Poland on a teaching assignment in Warsaw University for writing a novel revolving around Indian and Polish characters.

5.4.4 Evaluation of Language and Style

With regard to the style of the author of the book under review, the reviewer should ask himself the following questions: Is the language simple, lucid and devoid of cliches? Does the style appeal to you to read further? Or does it bore you? Is the organisation of facts and ideas proper and interesting? Moreover, each subject — that is, the occasion and the objective of the book — has a particular style suitable to it. The author's style must also be judged against this criterion. For instance, a humorous, carefree, or irrelevant style in writing about something that had caused grief to people (say floods, train accident, etc.) would be inappropriate. Style is not merely beauty and embellishment; it is mainly communication. The true test of a good style is whether it is suited to the subject or theme; and whether it conveys to the reader information, views, or feelings attractively and forcefully? Further, the reviewer should not judge the author's style based wholly on personal preferences, or call the style good or bad without explaining what he means by good or bad with reference to the context.

Finally, a review too must have a style for it adds to the readability of the review. A review that is written in a bad, boring style has no business to be critical of the book's bad style.

5.4.5 Evaluation of Production and Price

You owe it to your readers to tell him/her if the product is worth the money he or she will spend. Books nowadays are so expensive that this is often the crucial factor — it

may be a good book but full of “printer’s devils” — typing and other errors. May be the paper or the binding are of a very poor quality. Conversely, the final appearance may be glossy but the contents are virtually nil. You must pass on this information to your reader.

5.5 PRESENTATION OF THE BOOK REVIEW

We have already shown you a sample format in the above section. This gives at a glance, a nearly complete idea of the book in question if one is merely skimming through a magazine or newspaper.

5.5.1 Beginning

The beginning must make the reader want to read on. “For starters, take a charismatic scientist in West Africa, ...” review of *Brazzaville Beach* by William Boyd; Morrow; 316 pages; \$21 in *Time*, June 24, 1991. Again in the same issue another review begins “A gentle irony rests in the title of this novel, Anita Brookner’s 10th, for the lives portrayed in it are anything but brief” (review of *Brief Lives* by Anita Brookner; Random House; 260 pages; \$20).

5.5.2 Middle

This must contain the main body of your evaluation. What the book is about, a short extract or quotations, a comment on the theme, or other books by the same author or other similar books by other author’s etc.

5.5.3 End

You have to present a final comment, committing yourself to what you have been saying so far:

Fore example

“The book does not offer a universally applicable style of teaching with parade ground precision as every teacher has to evolve and develop a personal style of teaching . But it does provide a few applicable lists of suggestions for improving the impoverished quality of the classroom teaching. These observations are not eternal truths or even consensual truths, but only the opinions are experiences of fifteen educational practitioners and policy makers.

Altogether, these essays succeed in raising critical consciousness about assumptions and concepts and make a refreshing contribution to practical research and scholarship in higher education which is impossible to ignore. The missing links in the volume are the essays by Sarup Singh and V.V. John who could have perhaps enriched it with their literary devices, use of puns, wit and humour and other forms of word-play.

(review of *On Being a Teacher* ed. Amrik Singh; Konark Publisher; pp. 208 + X; Rs.150)

5.5.4 Language and Style

As already discussed earlier (5.4.4) you should, in brief, comment on the language, especially if there is something very unusual, good or bad or just new. Your **own** style should be free from biases, sarcasm, excessive use of punctuation. Your language should be factual, neutral and free from personal idiosyncrasies.

5.6 SUMMING UP

Units 4 and 5 have tried to introduce you to the art and craft of book reviewing. You have seen what a book review is, and how you should go about writing a good review in a responsible, objective and interesting manner. You have seen how necessary it is to read the book sincerely, have a wide acquaintance with other works on the subject, inform the reader generally about whether the book says anything new, or in a new way, and tell him whether he should buy the book, considering all the above facts. Remember that good reviewers are always in demand and if your reviews are liked, , you will continue to get more books to review. So keep reading books and book reviews too, if you wish to be a good reviewer.

5.7 AIDS TO ACTIVITIES

Activity 1

- a) trends – yes, see sentence 1
content – yes, see last 2 sentences
contribution – the reviewer does not seem to feel that the book says anything new.
- b) bias – yes, the bias seems to be very much there.

The reviewer feels convinced that a short story must **not** carry a heavy message.

Book 2

- a) trends – yes. see sentences 1 & 2
content – I feel there are no direct references.
contribution – the reviewer feels the anthologies cheat the readers
- b) bias – read the last sentence of the review and answer this.

Activity 2

This is to be purely a subjective evaluation so no hints can be given.