

WRITING A BOOK REVIEW

A book review is your opportunity to share your understanding of and opinions about a book you have read. Typically, reviewers attempt to answer three questions:

- What is the book about?
- What is the book's message?
- What they liked or did not like about the book?

In reviews of newly published works, reviewers normally assume that readers will be unfamiliar with the book. The reviewer uses the review as an opportunity to acquaint readers with the book, its contents and its value and to help readers decide whether or not they wish to read it. Since most reviews of new books appear in newspapers and magazines, they are brief (500-1500 words), and they cannot, like explications, comment on everything. On the other hand, they cannot focus on only one aspect of the writing; they attempt in some way to cover the book, supporting their opinions with quotations, examples, and specific references to the text.

Whether the book is a new title or an older work, a review or report should always include:

1. the full name of the author
2. the exact title of the book, underlined
3. the publisher and city of publication
4. the date the book was first published
5. an opening paragraph giving the reader some idea of the nature and scope of the work and establishing the tone of the review
6. a paragraph or two of plot summary if the book is a novel, or some summary of the contents if it is not
7. a paragraph on the theme, purpose, idea, or vision embodied in the book
8. a paragraph or two on the strengths, if any
9. a paragraph on the weaknesses, if any
10. a concluding paragraph in which the reviewer delivers any points that need to be made

As you plan your review, consider the three objectives of the reviewer. By answering the related questions, you will make a good start on developing a first draft of the book review.

Reviewer's Purpose #1: TELL WHAT THE BOOK IS ABOUT

FICTION	NON-FICTION
What is the plot? <i>Summarize the actions and the conflict at the heart of the work. Highlight a few events; do not give the entire story away. Be sure to include the name and author of the book.</i>	What basic subject does the book cover? Is there one part that seems especially important?

Reviewer’s Purpose #2: DESCRIBE THE STRENGTHS OR WEAKNESSES OF THE BOOK

FICTION	NON-FICTION
Does the book have an exciting opening?	Does the book contain new, interesting or controversial information?
Does the book contain a lot of action or suspense?	Does the book include useful facts or information? Are the facts and information accurate? Complete?
Are the characters or the setting distinctive or memorable?	Is the information presented clearly?
Does the book end in a surprising way, make a strong emotional impact, or leave the reader with a new understanding of an issue or change of viewpoint?	Is the book’s format (layout, visuals, type and/or organization of information, etc.) distinctive or appealing in some way?

Reviewer’s Purpose #3: CONVEY THE BOOK’S THEME OR MESSAGE

FICTION	NON-FICTION
What is the message or major idea the author attempts to convey?	What is the purpose of the book? What facts or information did the author set out to share?
How effectively does the author convey the message? Is the message relevant to contemporary society? To any particular audience? To your own life and/or experiences?	Would the facts or information the author provides be especially useful for any particular audience? Does the book advance the understanding matter in any way?

NOTE: Another approach to a book review is to focus on a specific element that ties all of the reviewer’s opinions or observations together. One might focus on the suspensefulness of a mystery or the authenticity or believability of a historical work or biography.

Tone, the writer’s attitude toward the subject and the reader, is very important in book reviews. Tone is somewhat dependent on the intended audience and purpose of the review. Audience analysis is crucial, especially if the review will be published. For collegiate writing assignments, it is reasonable to imagine that your classmates are your audience. (It is a very bad idea to imagine that your teacher is your audience.) It is most important to treat the reader and the subject with respect and to be clear and honest about your opinion of the book. This does not mean that the review should be solemn or boring or overly casual or informal. On the contrary, show respect for the reader by writing a substantive review which you would be interested in reading yourself.