Austin Peay State University
Academic Support Center
Writing Center

Suggestions for Writing a Book Review Essay

Resource for portions of this handout are from a website by Michelle Williams

The purpose of a book review is to discuss the text and possibly raise an argument for or against its theme, contents, ideas, etc. The elements of a book that need to be reviewed and discussed in an essay are determined by the professor; thus, follow the assignment's instructions and review the book accordingly.

The organization of a book review is straightforward. It consists of three basic portions which are the following:
1) A **summary** of the book read,
2) An **interpretation** by the reviewer of the author's argument,
3) A conclusion by the reviewer concerning **the significance or meaning** of this argument for a wider audience.

Think of the review as divided into these three basic portions, and even consider arbitrarily dividing the paper into three equal portions to include them. For a 6-page review, this would mean two pages for each portion.

The **summary** of your paper ought to capture the main features of the book, stated as neutrally and clearly as possible. At this point in your review, you do not take sides. You are simply presenting to the reader of your essay the facts, events, ideas and outcome of the book being discussed. You may choose to focus more on one aspect of the book as more important than the others to describe. For example, the plot or main characters may be more interesting than the setting. But stick to conveying the main issues and point of the book. This is all the background your reader will have to use in following your arguments about the book.

The **interpretive portion** of your paper ought to begin to analyze how and why the author has put his/her book together in the way he/she has. What are the relationships between the facts, ideas, characters, and events in the book? How did you react to this combination, and why? Did something the author say anger or please you? How was this effect achieved? Once you begin to figure these things out and present them to your reader, you will find you have a "slant" or an "angle" on the book which is yours alone. It is this interpretation that you are after in this section.

Finally, you will write a **conclusion that in a sense brings together the first two portions of your essay**. In your conclusion **you are trying to compare carefully what the author had to say (your summary) with your own reaction (interpretation).** You are doing this in order to be able to **generalize about the meaning of this book** for people other than yourself. You have had your own reaction, and now you want to step back and say, "Yes, but is that really all there is to it?" You are reflecting on the meaning of your own reaction at this point. This is what you could call the "So what?" section of your essay, for it asks you to tell your reader what the

relevance or validity of the book is for them. Relevance means the meaning it will have for persons concerned with other or similar problems; validity means its objectivity or accuracy.

How to Write a Review Essay

Checklist for Writing Book Reviews:

1) Read the book in its entirety.
2) If the professor wants background information about the author, focus more about the literary career or expertise that is related to the topic rather than an in-depth-study of his or her life.
3) If the author's intent for writing the book is obvious, state what that intent is.
4) Validate the author's expertise through analysis of his or her supporting evidence for the thesis.
5) In the introductory paragraph, apply the review toward a broader focus of significance. (For example, how does the topic apply to today?)
6) Use quotes effectively to accurately describe the author's ideas as well as possibly support your own.
7) Avoid opinionated, broad, and general unrelated statements concerning the book's contents and style. (Ex. "The book is interesting to read and was written in a style that was easy to understand.")
8) Include a balance of positive and negative comments as required by the assignment. If there are significant flaws in accurate reporting or logic, point them out, but avoid focusing the entire review on these flaws.
9) Incorporate your own experience, your reflections and knowledge to analyze the book more successfully.

When writing a review essay, your main objective is to **provide an overview of the most significant points that were raised by the author of a literary work**. A review essay is not the same as a book report, however, as a book report simply summarizes the work and provides a brief opinion on the story. The review essay, on the other hand, attempts to engage in a critical discussion of the literary work.

When asked to write a review essay, the most important step is to choose a literary piece of work that is suitable for writing a review. An edited collection, for example, can be difficult to review because the various contributors may have different viewpoints or may address different aspects of the same issue. Therefore, it is usually better to select a piece of work that was written by just one author. Similarly, older pieces are usually easier to review because you can discuss the significance of the work over time, a task that is more difficult to do with newer literary works.

When writing review essays, you will usually follow the same general pattern. First, you will write an **introduction** to the essay. In this portion of the essay, your goal is to **identify what you feel is the main thesis of the work and to preview your own critical response**.

After the introduction, you will then write a **brief summary** of the book. The length of your summary will depend upon the overall length of the paper. If writing an eight to ten page review essay, for example, your summary usually should not exceed four pages. If you are using more than half of your allotted words or pages on retelling the story, you are straying away from a review essay and entering into **the book report** realm.

When summarizing the book being reviewed, you should **focus only on the central claims and arguments made in the text**. You should **only discuss the information that is the most**

significant and that will help lead into the critical discussion, which is the next portion of the review essay.

In the critical discussion portion of the review essay, you will **evaluate the contribution the text has made to the discipline area it is written in**. In order to complete this portion, you should ask yourself how the book advances the debate that is discussed in the text. This requires you to identify the problems or controversies addressed in the text and assessing whether or not the book has made a valuable contribution to the field or simply whether or not the author has adequately supported his or her thesis. You will need to use evidence from the text in order to support your argument. This means you should refer the writing throughout the essay.

Finally, your review essay will need a conclusion. **In your conclusion, you should restate your thesis and summarize your critical analysis.** After all writing is complete, be certain to review the paper for clarity and proper use of grammar and punctuation.