

## Writing Book Reviews

A book review tells not only what a book is about, but also how successful it is at what it is trying to do. Professors often assign book reviews as practice in careful analytical reading.

As a reviewer, you bring together the two strands of accurate, analytical reading and strong, personal response when you indicate what the book is about and what it might mean to a reader (by explaining what it meant to you). In other words, reviewers answer not only the WHAT but the SO WHAT question about a book. Thus, in writing a review, you combine the skills of **describing** what is on the page, **analyzing** how the book tried to achieve its purpose, and **expressing** your own reactions.

### READING THE BOOK

As you're reading or preparing to write the review, ask yourself these questions:

#### **What are the author's viewpoint and purpose?**

The viewpoint or purpose may be implied rather than stated, but often a good place to look for what the author says about his or her purpose and viewpoint is the introduction or preface.

#### **What are the author's main points?**

Again, these will often be stated in the introduction.

#### **What kind of evidence does the author use to prove his or her points? Is the evidence convincing?**

Why or why not? Does the author support his or her points adequately?

#### **How does this book relate to other books on the same topic?**

Is the book unique? Does it add new information? What group of readers, if any, would find this book most useful?

#### **Does the author have the necessary expertise to write the book?**

#### **What are the most appropriate criteria by which to judge the book? How successful do you think the author was in carrying out the overall purposes of the book?**

Depending on your book's purpose, you should select appropriate criteria by which to judge its success. Use any criteria your instructor has given you in lecture or on your assignment sheet. Otherwise, here are some criteria to consider. For example, if an author says his or her purpose is to argue for a particular solution to a public problem, such as school reform or international relations, then the review should judge whether the author has defined the problem, identified causes, planned points of attack, provided necessary background information and offered specific solutions. A review should also indicate the author's professional expertise.

In other books, however, authors may argue for their theory about a particular phenomenon. Reviews of these books should evaluate what kind of theory the book is arguing for, how much and what kind of evidence the author uses to support his/her scholarly claims, how valid the evidence seems, how expert the author is, and how much the book contributes to the knowledge of the field.

## WRITING THE BOOK REVIEW

Although you should include what you feel is appropriate for explaining your assessment of a book, reviews generally include the following kinds of information.

Most reviews start off with a **heading** that includes all the bibliographic information about the book. If your assignment sheet does not indicate which form you should use, you can use the following:

*Title.* Author. Place of publication: publisher, date of publication. Number of pages.

Like most pieces of writing, the review itself usually begins with an **introduction** that lets your readers know what the review will say. The first paragraph usually includes the author and title again, so your readers don't have to look up to find the title. You should also include a very brief overview of the contents of the book, the purpose or audience for the book, and your reaction and evaluation.

Reviews then generally move into a section of **background information** that helps place the book in context and discusses criteria for judging the book.

Next, the review gives a **summary** of the main points of the book, quoting and paraphrasing key phrases from the author.

Finally, reviewers get to the heart of their writing—their **evaluation** of the book. In this section, reviewers discuss a variety of issues:

- how well the book has achieved its goal,
- what possibilities are suggested by the book,
- what the book has left out,
- how the book compares to others on the subject,
- what specific points are not convincing, and
- what personal experiences you've had related to the subject.

It is important to carefully distinguish your views from the author's, so that you don't confuse your reader.

Like other essays, book reviews usually end with a **conclusion** which ties together issues raised in the review and provides a concise comment on the book.

There is, of course, no set formula, but a **general rule of thumb is that the first one-half to two-thirds of the review should summarize the author's main ideas and at least one-third should evaluate the book. Check with your instructor.**

## SAMPLE

Below is a review of *Taking Soaps Seriously* by Michael Intintoli written by Ruth Rosen in the *Journal of Communication*. Note that Rosen begins with a context for Intintoli's book, showing how it is different from other books about soap operas. She finds a strength in the kind of details that his methodology enables him to see. However, she disagrees with his choice of case study. All in all, Rosen finds Intintoli's book most useful for novices, but not one that advances our ability to critique soap operas very much.

*Taking Soaps Seriously: The World of Guiding Light*. Michael Intintoli. New York: Praeger, 1984. 248 pp.

Ever since the U.S. public began listening to radio soaps in the 1930s, cultural critics have explored the content, form, and popularity of daytime serials. Today, media critics take a variety of approaches. Some explore audience response and find that, depending on sex, race, or even nationality, people "decode" the same story in different ways. Others regard soaps as a kind of subversive form of popular culture that supports women's deepest grievances. Still others view the soap as a "text" and attempt to "deconstruct" it, much as a literary critic dissects a work of literature. Michael Intintoli's project is somewhat different. For him, the soap is a cultural product mediated and created by corporate interests. It is the production of soaps, then, that is at the center of his *Taking Soaps Seriously*.

To understand the creation of soap operas, Intintoli adopted an ethnographic methodology that required a rather long siege on the set of "Guiding Light." Like a good anthropologist, he picked up a great deal about the concerns and problems that drive the production of a daily soap opera. For the novice there is much to be learned here. . . .

But the book stops short of where it should ideally begin. In many ways, "Guiding Light" was simply the wrong soap to study. First broadcast in 1937, "Guiding Light" is the oldest soap opera in the United States, owned and produced by Procter and Gamble, which sells it to CBS. It is therefore the perfect soap to study for a history of the changing daytime serial. But that is not Intintoli's project. . . .

*Taking Soaps Seriously* is a good introduction to the production of the daily soap opera. It analyzes soap conventions, reveals the hierarchy of soap production, and describes a slice of the corporate production of mass culture. Regrettably, it reads like an unrevised dissertation and misses an important opportunity to probe the changing nature of soap production and the unarticulated ideological framework in which soaps are created.

## POLISHING THE BOOK REVIEW

After you've completed your review, be sure to proofread it carefully for errors and typos. Double-check your bibliographic heading—title, author, publisher, and pages—for accuracy and correct spelling as well.

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