

Steps for Writing a Good Book Review

Before you write:

Know what a book review is...

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.

Read 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.

How to Start: Although you should include what you feel is appropriate (or what you've been assigned to cover) for explaining your assessment of a book, reviews generally include the following kinds of information. Just remember to carefully distinguish your views from the author's, so that you don't confuse your reader.

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.****Introduction to the subject, scope, and type of book**

- Identify the book by **author, title**, and sometimes **publishing information**.
- Specify the **type** of book (for example, fiction, nonfiction, biography, autobiography). Help your readers to review with perspective.
- Mention the book's **theme**.
- Include **background** if necessary to enable reader(s) to place the book into a specific context. For example, you might want to describe the general problem the book addresses or earlier work the author or others have done.

Brief summary/overview of the content

- **(For a nonfiction book) provide** an overview, including paraphrases and quotations, of the book's thesis and primary supporting points.
- **(For a work of fiction) briefly review** the story line for readers, being careful not to give away anything that would lessen the suspense for readers.
- **Provide your reactions to the book**
- **Describe the book:** Is it interesting, memorable, entertaining, instructive? Why?
- **Respond to the author's opinions:** What do you agree with? And why? What do you disagree with? And why?
- **Explore issues the book raises:** What possibilities does the book suggest? Explain. What matters does the book leave out? Explain.
- **For a nonfiction book,** provide an overview, including paraphrases and quotations, of the book's thesis and primary supporting points.
- **For a work of fiction,** briefly review the story line for readers, being careful not to give away anything that would lessen the suspense for readers.
- **Provide your reactions to the book**
- **Describe the book:** Is it interesting, memorable, entertaining, instructive? Why?

Conclusion

- **Relate your argument to other books or authors:** Support your argument for or against the author's opinions by bringing in other authors you agree with.
- **Relate the book to larger issues:** How did the book affect you? How have your opinions about the topic changed? How is the book related to your own course or personal agenda.

- **Tie together issues** raised in the review.
- **Briefly restate your main points** and your thesis statement if your teacher requires it.
- Also, if required, indicate 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.

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.