

Writing a critical book review



You may be asked to write a critical review of a book or a book chapter. Although this may be an unfamiliar exercise, it is not as complex a task as writing an essay requiring a lot of library research. It is, however, not the same as a book review in *The Canberra Times* which is written for the general reader.

Your book review is written for a reader (your lecturer or tutor) who is knowledgeable in the discipline and is interested not just in the coverage and content of the book being reviewed, but also in your critical assessment of the ideas and argument that are being presented by the author.

Look at the following three examples of instructions for book review assignments, all taken from courses at the Australian National University. Notice how the questions to be considered can help shape the structure of the review.

1. A book review in Political Science (length: 1,000 words)

The review should not be a summary of the book. Instead it should state what the book sets out to do and assess how well the author achieves that goal. Your review might therefore be guided by the following questions:

Objectives	What does the book set out to do?
Theory	Is there an explicit theoretical framework? If not, are there important theoretical assumptions?
Concepts	What are the central concepts? Are they clearly defined?
Argument	What is the central argument? Are there specific hypotheses?
Method	What methods are employed to test these?
Evidence	Is evidence provided? How adequate is it?
Values	Are value positions clear or are they implicit?
Literature	How does the work fit into the wider literature?
Contribution	How well does the work advance our knowledge of the subject?
Style	How clear is the author's language/style/expression?
Conclusion	A brief overall assessment.

2. A book review in Gender Studies (length: 1,000 words)

I would like all students to prepare a short critical book review. ... Some questions to ask yourself:

- who am I writing for?
- what shared knowledge and values am I assuming?
- why does any of this matter?
- why should anyone believe me?
- what are my reasons for thinking the way I do?

- what is my evidence?

Formal qualities:

- evidence of understanding the book's basic terminology and argument
- conceptual clarity
- consistent and logical argument supported by evidence
- independent judgement
- coherent structure
- lucid sentence and paragraph construction
- correct bibliographic citations
- adherence to word limit

Content:

- a summary of the book's scope and argument
- an assessment of the book in its own terms (ie, how well does it do what it sets out to do?)
- an assessment of the book in your own terms (eg, is the topic worthwhile?)
- does the book deal with the topic in the best way? How could it be improved?

3. A book review in Asian Studies (length: 1,200 words)

To 'critically discuss' a work is not an instruction either to agree or disagree with the author. The aim of this assignment is to:

1. demonstrate how well you can read material in the context of the course;
2. identify the main issues it raises;
3. give a clear, succinct account of those issues; and
4. present a reasoned judgment regarding the soundness of the views or arguments presented by the author.

You will need to ask yourself—and answer—questions such as:

- Who was the author?
- When did he write this article?
- Why did he write it?
- What was his intended audience?
- How would it have been received by such an audience?
- What are the main issues he raises?
- Are the author's views and arguments sound and valid?
- Does the author make a convincing case or provide an insightful account?
- Are there possible alternative explanations or positions that need to be considered?

These are the criteria that your markers will be following when they mark your review.

- Expression, grammar, spelling.
- Does the piece answer all parts of the question?

- Clear evidence of critical thinking.
- Is it clear and well structured?
- Is there an argument? Is it convincing and evidence-based?
- Does it follow the prescribed formatting instructions?
- Additional wow-factor?

Producing a critical review of a book: reading, writing, and assessing

Reading for the critical review

Obviously, to write a critical review of a book, you need to read the text. As the above examples indicate, the lecturer will give you advice on what they want you to critique. To go about this process, consider the following three steps.

Step 1: Get to know the book you are reviewing

Look at the title, the table of contents and any preface or introduction. These should give you some idea of the central focus and the coverage of the book and, if the preface is useful, also the author's reasons for writing the book.

Skim quickly through the whole book, running your eye over opening sentences of paragraphs and glancing at any tables, illustrations or other graphic materials.

Read more closely the first chapter, which should tell you the main issues to be discussed and indicate the theoretical or conceptual framework within which the author proposes to work.

Read closely the final chapter, which should cover the author's conclusions and summarise the main reasons why these conclusions have been reached.

Now that you are familiar with the text, read the whole text thoroughly to develop a basis on which to critically review it.

Step 2: Decide which aspects of the book you wish to discuss in detail in your review

Do you need to critically evaluate the theoretical approach, the content or case studies, the selection and interpretation of evidence, the range of coverage, and/or the style of presentation?

Usually you will discuss the main issues which the author has specifically examined. Sometimes you may choose a particular issue because it has importance for you and the course you are studying, even if it is not the main issue for the author.

Step 3: Deepen your understanding of the issues that you will be focusing on

Now, on the basis of your overall knowledge of the book and your decision about which issues you will discuss, read in closer detail the sections of the book which are relevant to these issues. Make notes of the main points and identify key quotations.

If necessary, read other articles or books which are relevant to your topic, possibly to provide supporting evidence or alternative theoretical models or interpretations of data.

You may also want to glance at other reviews of the book in recent academic journals in order to get a feel for the way the book has been received within the discipline. To search for other reviews in academic journals, use the Library's E-Resources and databases. However, only use these reviews to support your own evaluation; do not merely copy or imitate them.

Writing and structuring the review

Depending on the advice given to you by your lecturer, the structure of your review should allow you to address the assessment criteria and the questions posed by the lecturer.

Initially, identify the book (author, title, date of publication and other details that seem important, eg, it is originally a French edition, etc), indicate the major aspects of the book that will be discussed, and state the purpose of the review.

Then, provide a brief summary of the range, contents, and argument of the book. Occasionally you may summarise chapter by chapter, but in a short review (1000–1500 words) you usually pick up the main themes only. This section should not normally take up more than a third of the total review.

Next, and most significant, critically discuss 2–3 key issues raised in the book. This section is the core of your review. Make clear the author's own argument before you criticise and evaluate it. Support your criticisms with evidence from the text or from other writings. You may also want to indicate gaps in the author's treatment of a topic, but it is seldom useful to criticise a writer for not doing something they never intended to do.

For the conclusion, evaluate the overall contribution that the book has made to your understanding of the topic (and maybe its importance to the development of knowledge in this particular area or discipline, setting it in the context of other writings in the field).

Finally, provide a reference list or bibliography of the sources that you have referred to. Use the referencing format appropriate to your discipline.

Assessing the final draft of the review

Having written the final draft of the critical review, consider the following questions:

- Have you identified the book clearly, right at the start?
- Is the author's argument clearly and objectively summarised so that your reader can recognise the theoretical approach and the range of material covered? (about a third of a short review)
- Are the 2–3 key issues raised in this book clearly identified and discussed? (about 50–60% of the review)
- Have you given reasons for your criticism and your approval of the book?
- Is there a final evaluation of the book's importance, based on your earlier discussion?
- Is there a reference list and is it appropriately formatted?
- Has the review been formatted according to the lecturer's instructions? For example, have you used the right font, the right spacing, the right referencing format, and so on?