

How to Write a Critical Book Review

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Your review should have two goals: first, to inform the reader about the content of the book, and second, to provide an evaluation that gives your judgement of the book's quality.

Your introduction should include an overview of the book that both incorporates an encapsulated summary and a sense of your general judgment. This is the equivalent to a thesis statement.

Do NOT spend more than one-third or so of the paper summarizing the book. The summary should consist of a discussion and highlights of the major arguments, features, trends, concepts, themes, ideas, and characteristics of the book. While you may use direct quotes from the book (make sure you always give the page number), such quotes should never be the bulk of the summary. Much of your grade will depend on how well you describe and explain the material **IN YOUR OWN WORDS**. You might want to take the major organizing themes of the book and use them to organize your own discussion. This does NOT mean, however, that I want a chapter-by-chapter summary. Your goal is a unified essay.

So what do I want, if not just a summary? Throughout your summary, I want you to provide a critique of the book. (Hence the title: "A Critical Book Review.") A critique consists of thoughts, responses, and reactions. It is not necessarily negative. Nor do you need to know as much about the subject as the author (because you hardly ever will). The skills you need are an ability to follow an argument and test a hypothesis. Regardless of how negative or positive your critique is, you need to be able to justify and support your position.

Here are a number of questions that you can address as part of your critique. You need not answer them all, but questions one and two are essential to any book review, so those must be included. And these are **ABSOLUTELY NOT** to be answered one after another (*seriatim*). Don't have one paragraph that answers one, and then the next paragraph that answers the next, etc. The answers should be part of a carefully constructed essay, complete with topic sentences and transitions.

1. What is your overall opinion of the book? On what basis has this opinion been formulated? That is, tell the reader what you think and how you arrived at this judgment. What did you expect to learn when you picked up the book? To what extent – and how effectively – were your expectations met? Did you nod in agreement (or off to sleep)? Did you wish you could talk back to the author?

How To Write A Critical Book Report

RJ Shavelson



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