

THE BOOK REVIEW OR ARTICLE CRITIQUE: GENERAL GUIDELINES

A review (or “critique”) of a book or article is not primarily a summary. Rather, it **analyses, comments on** and **evaluates** the work. As a course assignment, it situates the work in the light of specific issues and theoretical concerns being discussed in the course. Your review should show that you can recognize **arguments** and engage in **critical thinking** about the course content. Keep questions like these in mind as you read, make notes, and then write the review or critique

1. What is the specific **topic** of the book or article? What overall **purpose** does it seem to have? For what **readership** is it written? (Look in the preface, acknowledgements, reference list and index for clues about where and how the piece was originally published, and about the author's background and position.)
2. Does the author state an explicit **thesis**? Does he or she noticeably have an axe to grind? What are the **theoretical assumptions**? Are they discussed explicitly? (Again, look for statements in the preface, etc. and follow them up in the rest of the work.)
3. What exactly does the work **contribute** to the overall topic of your course? What general problems and concepts in your discipline and course does it engage with?
4. What **kinds of material** does the work present (e.g. primary documents or secondary material, personal observations, literary analysis, quantitative data, biographical or historical accounts)?
5. **How** is this material used to demonstrate and argue the thesis? (As well as indicating the overall argumentative structure of the work, your review could quote or summarize specific passages to describe the author's presentation, including writing style and tone.)
6. Are there **alternative ways** of arguing from the same material? Does the author show awareness of them? In what respects does the author agree or disagree with them?
7. What theoretical issues and topics for **further discussion** does the work raise?
8. What are **your own reactions and considered opinions** regarding the work?
 - Browse in published scholarly book reviews to get a sense of the ways reviews function in intellectual discourse. Look at journals in your discipline or general publications such as *University of Toronto Quarterly*, *London Review of Books*, or *New York Review of Books* (online at www.nybooks.com/archives/).
 - Some book reviews summarize the book's content briefly and then evaluate it; others integrate these functions, commenting on the book and using summary only to give examples. Choose the method that seems most suitable according to your professor's directions.
 - To keep your focus, remind yourself that your assignment is primarily to discuss the book's treatment of its topic, not the topic itself. Your key sentences should therefore say "This book shows...the author argues" rather than "This happened...this is the case."