

How to Write A Book Review

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Philosophy of the Book Review

A book fills a gap. [Example of faint praise: “This book fills a much-needed gap.”]

The Task of the Reviewer:

A book review answers the following question

1. What is the gap the author tries to fill (What is the central problem or issue addressed)?
2. How does the author go about filling the gap (How does the author address the problem/issue identified)?
3. Is the author successful in filling the gap? (Does the author succeed in the goals s/he identified)?
4. How does the filled gap look like? (That is, an overall evaluation of the book)

For advanced reviewers only:

4. How do the gap-filling exercise and its results compare to those by other historians? (is this novel? Has it been done before?)

Keep in mind: book reviews contain a brief summary of the content of the book. The main focus of the review is on analysis and evaluation.

I. Read the book while keeping the following in mind

1. Identify the subject matter of the book. What is the question the author attempts to answer? How does the author go about answering that question? What is original about the way the author discusses the main topics of the book? What other possible ways of answering the main question of the book are there? What is missing in the answers the author gives? What areas are not covered? What kind of objections can you formulate against the arguments of the author? How is the main question and the main answers different from other sources in the history of medicine you are familiar with?
2. How does the author approach the subject? Chronologically? Topically? What is the time period covered? What is the geographical area covered? How does the author organise the book? In what other ways could it have been done?
3. Identify the question or questions the author poses at the beginning (The author will usually tell you this information in the “Preface” or the “Introduction.” After reading the book, reread the Introduction - it will make more sense to you the second time through.)
4. Identify the thesis: The main conclusion of the book, the answer to the questions posed in the introduction.
5. Which historical methods does the author use? (Social history, intellectual history, cultural history, history of ideas, etc.)
6. Identify the kind of historical evidence the author uses. (Does the author primarily rely on medical sources? Popular media? Patient records? Newspapers? Archival documents?) How does the author make use of these different sources? How (and how well) does the author support his/her generalizations with historical evidence?
7. What are the main weaknesses in this book? Which questions are left unanswered? What are the main strengths?

II. Writing the Book Review

Book reviews are usually structured in three parts.

1. An **introductory paragraph** where you explain the subject and the thesis of the book and what it contributes to the history of medicine. From this introductory paragraph, the reader of your review will have a good sense of what the book is about.
2. The **body of the review** in which you describe the main points the author makes in support of his/her thesis. In the body of the review, you provide a more elaborate summary of the book with the questions above in mind. It is of course impossible to summarise the whole book. Providing a chapter outline will make for very dull reading. Therefore, focus on the two or three main contributions you think this book makes, how the author argues these main points, and how they relate to more general themes in the history of medicine.
3. A **conclusion**. In the concluding paragraphs, you critique the book. You detail the shortcomings in the use of evidence, the type of evidence used, the historical analysis provided, and the conclusions drawn.