

# Reading and Reviewing Scholarly Books



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[March 21, 2007]

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## **Preface**

As part of its mission, the Book Reviews Editorial Office for *Medical Anthropology Quarterly* aims to provide book reviewing opportunities and academic publishing-related experiences to newer scholars—including undergraduate and graduate students at SDSU. This manual was created to help achieve this aim, with support from the College of Arts and Letters and the indispensable efforts of editorial assistant Raven Keppinger.

Feedback regarding this manual's practical use to you as a reviewer—and as a reader—is most welcome. Please contact us at [MAQbook@mail.sdsu.edu](mailto:MAQbook@mail.sdsu.edu) or [esobo@mail.sdsu.edu](mailto:esobo@mail.sdsu.edu).



## Introduction

When we read a book, we also react to it. Book reviews are one way to channel our reactions so that others may profit from our experience as a reader of the text in question.

This *manual* is designed to provide a general overview of how to write a book review. As such, it also must touch upon the art of reading. Part I does just that; review-writing advice is contained in Part II.

One of the most important things to remember about writing a book review is that a book review is not a book summary. It does not simply restate the book's contents.

Rather, a *book review* is a critical analysis and evaluation. It considers the book's purpose, content, quality, and significance to the relevant discipline. It examines the book's strengths and weaknesses. It passes judgment on whether or not the author(s) succeeded in supporting a thesis with authoritative evidence, or in meeting stated aims. It also may ask whether the aims were appropriate in light of the accepted academic standards set by the discipline in question.



## I. How to Read a Book

### 1. Getting Started

You have a scholarly book in hand. Before reading the book in entirety, consider the following:

- What is the title of the book?
- How is the book formatted?
  - Does it contain a Table of Contents? Introduction or Preface? Foreword? Index? Glossary? Bibliography? Appendices? Errata? (If some of these terms are unfamiliar to you, please see the Glossary at the end of this manual.)
  - How is it printed? Is the print too small? Too big? Is the paper too coarse or glossy?
- Read the preface or introduction, if provided. These sections should describe the author's purpose in writing the book, or tell the tale behind the book's generation. These sections will help you focus on the book's thesis or main idea. Here, you may begin to identify some limitations of the book's scope. You may begin to think of ideas to refer to later, when you address whether or not the author has accomplished his or her objectives.
- Review the Table of Contents. This will show the book is organized and outline how the author(s) develop main ideas throughout the text.

Begin by taking notes and formulating an outline of what your purpose or objective in reading the book is. Consider the following:

- What do you think the title means in regard to the book's content and purpose?
- What does the author intend to discuss?
- What do you know about the author? Consult outside information in reference to the authors' reputation, qualifications and influences in their research.
- What do you know about the genre in which the author is writing?
- What do you know of critical theories involved in his or her field of study?
- What questions do you have, or are you looking to having answered, in relation to your interest in reading the book?

## 2. Reading the Book

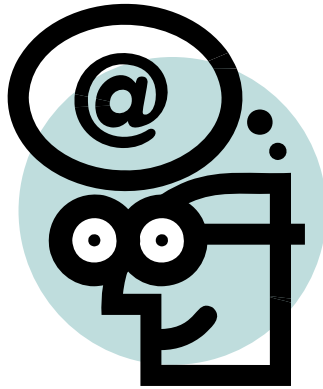
Read the whole book from beginning to end. Do not skip around or over the foreword, preface or other parts that may not at first glance appear central to the body of the text. Information contained in these sections may help you to understand the book better because these sections should provide some background information as to the author's purpose, experience, and future scholarly goals. If you do not understand a certain section or chapter, re-read it and, if possible, read the entire book twice. The first reading will provide you with an overview and the second will help you focus more on specific details in relation to the author's objectives and your own goals as a reader.

Take notes as you read in conjunction with the outline that you prepared. This will provide you with an opportunity to answer some of the questions that you may have had about the overall style of the book and the authors' intentions. Here, you can record your impressions, reactions, and any questions that may come up over the course of your reading.

Some questions to consider while reading:

- Who is the author's audience?
- What is the style of writing and does it suit the author's intended audience?
  - Narrative – tells a chronological story
  - Descriptive – evokes pictures through words
  - Expository – explains and analyzes
  - Argumentative – relies on persuasive techniques
- What discipline or genre does the book fit in to?
- Why did the author write on this particular subject?
  - To share research results?
  - Explain technicalities within a discipline?
  - Promote a particular viewpoint on the subject?
  - Clarify misconceptions related to a particular theory or regarding a particular field of research?
  - As a handbook or textbook?
- From what point of view does the author write?
- What is the central thesis of the book?
  - What does the author think about previous research regarding this particular subject?
- Are concepts and ideas clearly defined and developed?
  - Which aspects are covered and which are not?
  - How does this affect the books or the author's authority?
- How accurate is the information and supporting evidence provided by the book? (Feel free to consult outside sources.)
- What types of sources did the author use?
  - Primary?
  - Secondary?
  - Original research? If so, using what methods?

- What has the book accomplished?
  - Did the author achieve his/her goal?
  - Is further research discussed or needed?
  - Is the title appropriate in relation to content?
  - How many pages is the book? Is it too short? Too long? (This question will make sense to ask after you have read the book as well.)
  - Are there figures, tables, maps, or other illustrations? Do they aid in understanding the written material?
  - Do you agree or disagree with the author's point of view?
- Are there any factual errors, oversights, or faulty assumptions?
- Would you recommend this book to others? Why or why not?
  - Will it be useful for teaching and if so, at what level?



### **3. Digesting What You have Read**

After you read the book, and before you write your review, take a break. Put the book and your notes down for one day. You will have some time to ponder what you have read, and to think about and consider your reactions to certain aspects of the book. When you return to the book later, you will be refreshed and perhaps more focused for writing.

Write down your overall impressions of the book and try to condense these into a general statement that reflects your overall reaction. Then, make a list of points that you would like to make to those who are interested in your review. Study your notes and organize them in relation to how you would like to present your review. This will provide you with a logical framework for your discussion; it will result in a strong and clear structure for writing. Outline your criticisms, appraisals, and arguments. Armed with your outline, notes, and list of points as a guide, you are now ready to begin writing your book review.



## II. Writing a Book Review

In addition to your name and contact information or affiliation, every book review should include:

- Full title of the book
- Author
- Publisher and location
- Date of publication
- Edition (if provided)
- Number of pages (including Roman numerals)
- Number of tables, figures or other illustrations

Some also include the book's price and ISBN (International Standard Book Number).

Here is an example (but please note: exact format specifications differ from discipline to discipline as well as from journal to journal):

*Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban*, J. K. Rowling, New York: Arthur A. Levine Books, 1999, ix + 435 pp.

Begin the review with an introductory statement that captures readers' attention and sets the tone of the review. Specify the type of book. State the subject or topic of the book followed by the author's thesis, assumptions, supporting evidence (or not), and whether or not the author achieved his or her goal.

Discuss the general problem or question that the book speaks to. Identify the specific issues that the book addresses and delimit those that it does not.

Explain how the author developed and supported his or her thesis. Use quotations or otherwise demonstrate important points or peculiarities.

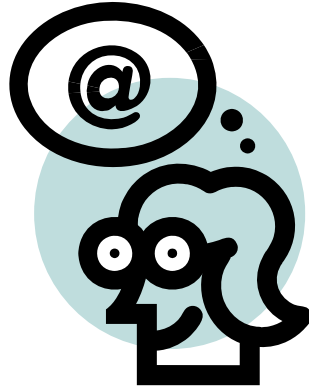
Evaluate the book for accuracy, significance, thoroughness, and usefulness to the intended audience. Respond to the author's opinions and note whether or not you feel they were supported by the evidence provided. Why or why not? State whether you agree or disagree with main points and explain why or why not. Develop your reaction(s) to the book with supporting arguments derived from the outline you created while reading.

Most book reviewers are selected on the basis of their knowledge of the field in question. Therefore, try to describe what (if anything) the book adds to 'the literature' that already exists on the topic in question.

If you wish, you may remark upon how the book affected you as a reader. For instance, did you change any of your previous views based on the author's arguments or information provided?

Conclude with a *brief* summary. This will include your final assessment of the purpose, quality, content and significance of the book in relation to the author's authority and qualifications. Would you recommend this book to others? Why or why not? Finally, if you have not already done so, identify the audience that will find the book of value.





## **Wrapping Things Up: Also Consider...**

### **What NOT to Include in your Review:**

- Footnotes
- Bibliography (references should be avoided if possible)
- Long or block quotations from the book
- Reference to or quotes from other reviews of the book (the whole goal of doing the review is to express your views—not the views of others)
- Background information on the author(s) that is not related to the book in question

### **Remember:**

- Make sure you understand the type of review required. Depending on the purpose of the review, or specific details set forth by the book review publisher, reviews can be as short as 50-100 words, or as long as 1500 words. They can sometimes be written in the first person ("I"), and sometimes not.
- It's okay to list what you would have liked the author to have addressed, but never confuse the book under review with the book that you wish the author would have written. Make sure that you understand the author's stated goals for the book and discuss how well those goals have been met.
- Review the book you read, not other books by the same author or in the same genre.
- Keep your audience in mind. This will help guide your discussion, topical emphasis, and writing style.
- Your conclusion should include your final assessment; it should never introduce new material.
- It is generally not a good idea to try to write a review in one sitting. Allow enough time for revisions and proofreading.
- Don't be intimidated by famous authors.

## Sources

(last accessed March 14, 2007)

1. <http://library.queensu.ca/inforef/bookreview/wri.htm>
2. <http://www.lavc.edu/Library/bookreview.htm>
3. <http://www.lib.uwaterloo.ca/libguides/1-12.html>
4. [http://www.library.mun.ca/guides/howto/write\\_book\\_review.php](http://www.library.mun.ca/guides/howto/write_book_review.php)
5. <http://www.writing-world.com/freelance/asenjo.shtml>
6. <http://www.library.dal.ca/how/bookrev.htm>
7. <http://www.coun.uvic.ca/learn/program/hndouts/Bkrev.html>

## Glossary

Genre	Category describing the type of book in hand (e.g., novel, textbook, monograph, pamphlet, edited collection)
Monograph	Scholarly book concerning one particular project or one single subject.
Preface	Introductory statement regarding the circumstances behind the book (e.g., the authors' reasons for writing it). Prefaces are generally personal statements, as opposed to introductions—but not always.
Foreword	Introductory endorsement written by an expert in the field.
Introduction	Introductory statement regarding the book's aims and objectives. Introductions are generally focused squarely on a book's contents, as opposed to prefaces—but not always.
Body	The book's chapters; the main part of a book.
Endnotes	While footnotes containing supplementary information are set at the foot (bottom) of a page, endnotes are simply set at the end of each chapter or at the end of the final chapter of a book. They contain elaborations, references, and other information that, while important, would have been distracting had it been presented within the body of the book.
Appendix	Supplementary material (e.g., data charts, blank surveys) appended or added to a book after the last chapter.
Bibliography	Alphabetical list of references, with complete citation information provided so that the reader will be able to look them up if desired.
Index	List of topics discussed in the book, and pages on which to find out about them.
Errata	Corrections to previous editions or late corrections to the edition in hand.