

## **Book Review Guide**<sup>1</sup>

By Colin Neufeldt, Department of History,

Concordia University College of Alberta

A book review is not simply a summary of the contents of a book; rather, it is a critical essay that analyzes and evaluates a book. In your book review you are demonstrating to your reader that you have thought critically about what you have read in the book. Therefore, your book review should:

- a) be a coherent and lucid evaluation of the book; and
- b) point out both the strengths and weaknesses of the book.

Book reviews are published in almost every type of academic journal. The published reviews help students and professors to learn about: a) new and interesting books; and b) the latest directions in historical research and debate.

Preparing a book review requires both critical thought and effort. The 3 steps set out below will help you to prepare and write a book review.

### **Step 1: Some Important Points to Remember when Reading the Book**

The first step in writing a book review is to **read** the book. While reading the book, you will want to keep in mind the 8 points listed below. As you read the book, be sure to take notes on the 8 points listed below; this will later save you time when you are writing the book review.

1) **Purpose:** What was the author's purpose in writing the book? Does the author have a clear, central argument or thesis? Does the author explicitly state the thesis, or do you have to deduce it?

2) **Interpretation:** Interpretation is a key component in writing history. How does the author interpret what happened? How does the author draw connections or links between events or personalities? How does the author explain the significance of events? Does the author use a particular mode of analysis or theory in the book (i.e. Marxist, feminist, political, social, etc.) or is the bases of the author's analysis implied (i.e., "common sense" ideas, religious perspective

---

<sup>1</sup> Some of the sources that I used to prepare this Book Review Guide include: Department of History Website, The University of Alberta; Jules R. Benjamin, *A Student's Guide to History* (Boston: Bedford, 2007); and William K. Storey & Towser Jones, *Writing History: a Guide for Canadian Students* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008).

etc.)? Are the author's interpretations logical and consistent? Do the author's interpretations help you to understand the subject matter of the book or are they confusing? Do you think that there are better ways to explain what happened or evaluate developments than the interpretative approach used by the author?

3) **Contextualization:** How well does the author explain the broader historical context of the events or developments that he or she is discussing in the book? Does the book have too narrow of a focus? Does the author try to connect his or her topic to broader historical developments? Does the author's focus in the book make sense to you? Does the author's focus assist you in understanding what actually happened?

4) **Omissions and Errors:** What does the author omit, ignore or overlook in his or her analysis? Do the omissions weaken the author's arguments? Does the author explain why he or she has included these omissions in the book? Are there errors in the book, and how often do they appear? Are these serious errors and how do they impact the thesis and other arguments used by the author? Do the omissions and errors seriously diminish the value of the book?

5) **Sources:** What kind of primary and secondary sources does the author use in the book? Does the author use any archival records? Are the secondary sources more recent works or are they old and out of date? Are the secondary sources academic works? Has the author taken advantage of all of the major sources on the topic or are there important sources that have been ignored or excluded? Does the author incorporate the latest academic research on the topic?

6) **Style:** Is the book well written? Is it easy to understand? Is it easy to read or is the author's writing style cumbersome, dense, and/or loaded with jargon or technical terms that are hard to understand? Does the author have a glossary to explain abbreviations or complex terms? Does the author exhibit a writing style that is very engaging and enjoyable to read? Does the writing style enhance the book and strengthen the writer's arguments?

7) **Context:** How does your book fit within the context of other historical works? Does the book introduce new ideas or advance knowledge in ways that make it a ground-breaking analysis? Does it challenge common interpretations, or does it repeat and uphold standard interpretative approaches? Does it include new methodological or theoretical approaches to the topic? Is it a contentious or controversial book? Have other scholars accepted or rejected the author's arguments or interpretative approach?

8) **Author's background (Optional):** In some cases, it may be relevant to discuss the author's professional qualifications and experience. Is the author a well-respected authority in the field or a young scholar? Often the library catalogue and the internet can provide important information about the author and other books or articles that the author has written.

## **Step 2: Some Important Points to Remember when Preparing to Write the Book Review**

After you have read the book, you should consider what will be the main elements of your review. Before you begin writing the review you will want to think about the following 3 elements and how they should be included in your review.

- 1) **Major Arguments and Observations:** Review your notes and prepare a list of the most important arguments and observations; this can help in fleshing out the central argument or theme of your review. You should also consider:
  - a) What will be the most effective way to present your arguments in your review;
  - b) How you will support your arguments with specific examples and short effective quotes that support your arguments;
  - c) How you will summarize various sections of the book to support your argument.

**Remember: You have to be able to substantiate any arguments that you make in your review.**

- 2) **Theme:** Like an essay, your review should have a central argument as its focus. How would you summarize your evaluation of the book, while focusing on a theme around which you can organize your review? Can you incorporate this central argument in your introduction and conclusion?
- 3) **Profile:** In your review, you should provide a brief summary of the book's main argument and themes. This is usually one to three paragraphs in length. Do not provide a summary of the different sections or chapters of the book; instead, you should focus on the author's central purpose in writing the book and find an effective way to sum up the author's work for your reader.

Before you begin writing your review, it is a good idea to prepare an outline to help you focus on the main elements of your review.

### **Step 3: Writing the Review**

**Remember: Your review is a critical essay.**

When writing your review, you should keep in mind the following elements that are part of every good book review:

- 1) The bibliographic information of the book review appears at the top of the review, just above the introductory paragraph. For example:

*The Russian Presidency: Society and Politics in the Second Russian Republic.* By Thomas M. Nichols. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999. Pp. 247.

- 2) A short, effective introduction that states the theme or central argument of your review.
- 3) A concise and accurate synopsis of the book. This often follows the introductory paragraph and can be one to three paragraphs in length. Your synopsis should not be the introduction.
- 4) The body of your essay should be a series of observations about the book. Here you will point out the book's strengths and weaknesses, as well as how the book fits within the context of other historical works. Ensure that your ideas and observations are logical and are connected to one another; don't simply list your observations in a haphazard manner.
- 5) A short conclusion that summarizes your arguments and ideas.
- 6) If you are citing other works in your review, then follow *The Chicago Manual of Style*.
- 7) Please ensure that your review is lucid, grammatically correct, and free of typing and spelling errors. It is a good idea to have some proofread your review before submitting it to your professor.