

How to Write a History Book Review

Writing a book review is one of the fundamental skills that every historian must learn. An undergraduate student's book review should accomplish two main goals:

1. Lay out an author's argument, and
2. Most importantly, critique the historical argument.

It is important to remember that **a book review is not a book report**. You need to do more than simply lay out the contents or plot-line of a book. You may briefly summarize the historical narrative or contents but must focus your review on the historical argument being made and how effectively the author has supported this argument with historical evidence. If you can, you may also fit that argument into the wider historiography about the subject.

Writing a book review may seem very difficult, but in fact there are some simple rules you can follow to make the process much easier.

Before you read, find out about the author's prior work

What academic discipline was the author trained in? What other books, articles, or conference papers has s/he written? How does this book relate to or follow from the previous work of the author? Has the author or this book won any awards? This information helps you understand the author's argument and critique the book.

As you read, write notes for each of the following topics.

Write a few sentences about the author's approach or genre of history. Is the focus on gender? Class? Race? Politics? Culture? Labor? Law? Something else? A combination? If you can identify the type of history the historian has written, it will be easier to determine the historical argument the author is making.

Summarize the author's subject and argument. In a few sentences, describe the time period, major events, geographical scope and group or groups of people who are being investigated in the book. Why has the author chosen the starting and ending dates of the book's narrative? Next, discover the major thesis or theses of the book, the argument(s) that the author makes and attempts to support with evidence. These are usually, but not always, presented in a book's introduction. It might help to look for the major question that the author is attempting to answer and then try to write his or her answer to that question in a sentence or two. Sometimes there is a broad argument supported by a series of supporting arguments. It is not always easy to discern the main argument but this is the most important part of your book review.

What is the structure of the book? Are the chapters organized chronologically, thematically, by group of historical actors, from general to specific, or in some other way? How does the structure of the work enhance or detract from the argument?

Look closely at the kinds of evidence the author has used to prove the argument. Is the argument based on data, narrative, or both? Are narrative anecdotes the basis of the argument or do they supplement other evidence? Are there other kinds of evidence that the author should have included? Is the evidence convincing? If so, find a particularly supportive example and explain how it supports the author's thesis. If not, give an example and explain what part of the argument is not supported by evidence. You may find that some evidence works, while some does not. Explain both sides, give examples, and let your readers know what you think overall.

Closely related to the kinds of evidence are the kinds of sources the author uses. What different kinds of primary sources are used? What type of source is most important in the argument? Do these sources allow the author to adequately explore the subject? Are there important issues that the author cannot address based on these sources? How about the secondary sources? Are there one or more secondary books that the author seems to lean heavily on in support of the argument? Are there works that the author disagrees with in the text? This will tell the reader how the work fits into the historiography of the subject and whether it is presenting a major new interpretation.

Is the argument convincing as a whole? Is there a particular place where it breaks down? Why? Is there a particular element that works best? Why? Would you recommend this book to others, and if so, for whom is it appropriate? General readers? Undergraduates? Graduates and specialists in this historical subject? Why? Would you put any qualifications on that recommendation?

After having written up your analyses of each of these topics, you are ready to compose your review. There is no one way to format a book review but here is a common format that can be varied according to what you think needs to be highlighted and what length is required.

1. Introduce the author, the historical period and topic of the book. Tell the reader what genre of history this work belongs to or what approach the author has used. Set out the main argument.
2. Summarize the book's organization and give a little more detail about the author's sub-arguments. Here you would also work in your assessment of the evidence and sources used.
3. Strengths and weaknesses or flaws in the book are usually discussed next. It is up to you to decide in what order these should come, but if you assess the book positively overall, do not spend inordinate space on the book's faults and vice versa.
4. In the conclusion, you may state your recommendations for readership unless that has been covered in your discussion of the book's strengths and weaknesses. You might review how convincing the argument was, say something about the importance or uniqueness of the argument and topic, or describe how the author adds to our understanding of a particular historical question.