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How to Write a Critical Book Review for History*

NOTE: *Always check with your professor to make sure you understand the specific requirements of any assignment. This handout contains general guidelines.*

Purpose

The purpose of a **review** of a work (book or article) is generally to let readers know what the work is about and what its merits are so that readers can decide whether they want to read the work. Because the readers of a review probably have not read the work under discussion, you must describe the work as well as evaluate it.

For a **critique** or **critical review**, readers may have read the work; therefore, you need to give less attention to description and summary but more attention to evaluation.

Choosing a Work

Sometimes your professor assigns a particular book or article; however, your professor may give you a list of works from which to choose or a broad field that you will have to narrow-first to a specific area and then to a specific work. If you are given a choice, try to find a work that interests you.

1. Ask someone whose judgment you trust to recommend a work or try to find a work by an authority who is respected in the field. Your textbook may contain a helpful bibliography.
2. Examine the work carefully to see whether the subject and treatment are appealing to you. Check contents, indexes, and introductions.
3. Flip through the text, reading portions in order to determine whether the vocabulary and style are clear and comprehensible to you.

Content of the Review or Critique

All reviews should (1) identify the work and the author, (2) include a summary of the work, and (3) include an evaluation. Other elements may be requested or required by your professor; if you are uncertain, ask the professor. A review or critique **may** include some or all of the following:

1. An abstract, summary, or synopsis to summarize the essential contents and main ideas. This section is usually more detailed in a review than in a critique or critical review;
2. A statement or thorough discussion of the author's thesis (main underlying idea), purpose, and methods of development.
3. A brief biographical sketch of the intellectual life of the author, linking the work under discussion to the author's other works;

4. A discussion of the relationship between the work being reviewed and other works in the field;
5. Your evaluation of the work, clearly presented and well-supported;
6. Selected short quotations from the work that are representative of the theme, tone, and style.

Organization

The following structure is simply a recommendation, but it does contain the normal elements of a history book review.

•Title

Your title is not the same as the title of the work under discussion but may include the work's title. Do not italicize or write quotation marks around your own title; however, do italicize the titles of books and periodicals and place quotation marks around article titles. Try to make the title interesting so the reader will want to read your review.

EXAMPLE: Fighting the Good Fight, A Critical Review of John Shy's *A People Numerous and Armed*

•Full Bibliographical Citation

History book reviews almost always start with a full citation, separated from your title by two lines of space and leaving two lines of space before you begin the body of your essay. It is normal to use the Chicago Manual of Style's citation system or The Turabian Guide to format your citation.

EXAMPLE: John Shy. *A People Numerous and Armed: Reflections on the Military Struggle for American Independence*. Ann Arbor: Univ. of Michigan Press, 1990.

•Introduction/Thesis Paragraph

1. Include one or more general statements that give a quick indication of the work's contents and your reaction to it.
2. Include your **thesis statement**—your main argument which is the focus of the review. This will normally be a critique of the book in its broadest sense. Is the book worthwhile for others to read? Why or why not?

•Body/Supporting Paragraphs

The number of body paragraphs varies according to the nature of the assignment and the extent of what you have to say. In general there will be at least one paragraph of summary and at least one paragraph of evaluation.

1. In your summary, include all the significant points of the work, including the points the author emphasizes.
2. Explain the purpose of the work and, if appropriate, the author's background and methodology (often found in the preface, foreword, or introduction).
3. Present your critical evaluation, discussing both positive and negative features as appropriate. Support all your judgments with evidence from the work, paraphrasing and quoting excerpts. Is the work thorough? fair? clear? convincing? significant? How does the work relate to other works in the field or to your general understanding of the subject?

•Conclusion/Ending Paragraph

Give an overall evaluation as the conclusion of what you have said so far. In a review, make a recommendation about the type of reader likely to enjoy or benefit from the work. In a critique, include an indication of the work's merit in the field.