



Department of History

History Lab

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Writing Book Reviews

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 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 of the author's argument and evidence.

Choosing a Work

Sometimes your professor assigns a particular book; 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. If you have a choice, but are unclear about how to go about choosing an appropriate work try the following:

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 All Reviews

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.

Content Which May be Required

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
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. An evaluation of the work, clearly presented and well-supported
6. Selected short quotations from the work that demonstrate 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:** Dining as Class, A Critical Review of Andrew P. Haley's *Turning the Tables*

★ **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:** Andrew P. Haley. *Turning the Tables: Restaurants and the Rise of the American Middle Class, 1880 – 1920*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011.

★ **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.

★ **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, especially 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.
4. Support all your judgments with evidence from the work, paraphrasing and quoting excerpts.

★ **Conclusion/Ending Paragraph:** Give an overall evaluation as the conclusion. In a review, make a recommendation about the type of reader likely to benefit from the work. In a critique, include an indication of the work's importance in the field.