

INSTRUCTIONS ON WRITING

BOOK REVIEWS

The best type of book report or review is a well organized, well written literary composition, which skillfully interweaves a summary of the book with the reviewer's criticisms and reactions. It should incorporate in some way all the points indicated in the outline below. Put the materials in your own words and in the order you choose. Do not follow my numbered outline. It is only a guide, so do your report in your own way. Choose a book you are interested in. It should be a scholarly history book or a biography, not a novel, a children's book, or a picture book. The report should be at least four but no more than seven pages long.

1. **Bibliographical citation at the top of page one.** Author, full title (underlined). (Series, if any and editor, if any; place of publication: publisher, date), number of pages.

Example:

Margaret Mead, Soviet Attitudes Toward Authority: An Interdisciplinary Approach to Problems of Soviet Character. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1951), 148 pp.

2. **The author.** Present information on the author that would help a potential reader of the report evaluate what the book is like. For example, what is the author's nationality (especially if he/she is not American). Is the author a journalist, a college professor, a professional writer, or an amateur? Has the author played an active part in the events described? Does some fact about his or her background need to be known in order to understand the book properly? What has the author written before and since this work? Avoid references to the writer's formal university training unless something extraordinary is involved. It may be assumed that he or she is educated, and noted if such is not the case. These questions can generally be answered by reading the preface to the book, and by referring to books like The Directory of American Scholars.
3. **Subjects, aim and scope of book.** On what general subject is the author writing? What does the writer say he or she is attempting to do? How has the author limited the topic? What justification is there for writing another book on this subject? Summarize or quote the writer's own words, but be careful because many authors give banal reasons for writing books.
4. **Sources.** On what sources has the author based his/her findings? What type(s) of primary source materials have been used (i.e. manuscripts, diaries, letters, debates, newspapers of the time, etc.). An "interpretive" or synthetic work may use secondary accounts primarily. Do not list the author's bibliography, but do mention if there is no bibliography, or if it is short. Discuss the author's use of source materials.
5. **Contents.** Present a survey of the contents, explaining how the various chapters contribute to the organization and composition for the volume. Give a profile rather than a detailed

portrait of the contents. You might look at the reviews in the New York Times Book Review or the Times Literary Supplement for a model.

6. **Thesis**. What general thesis and conclusion has the author presented? How convincing has he/she been, or do you disagree with the thesis?
7. **Opinion and bias**. How does the author handle controversial topics (Marxism, religion, etc.). Does the writer have some obvious bias that makes it difficult to be objective? Remember that a writer may have strong convictions yet not be opinionated or biased.
8. **Conclusions**. What was the intellectual impact of this book on you personally? Would you recommend the work as informative and stimulating to other intellectually curious people? Omit any consideration of whether the book was pleasurable or not. References to the Author's literary style are unnecessary unless there is something unusual to be noted. Be scrupulously fair throughout the review. Do not criticize the author for failing to write the kind of book he or she did not intend to write. Did the author do a good job at what the author was trying to do?
9. **Style in book reports/reviews**. Keep to the point. Choose your words carefully and avoid superfluous words and sentences, especially the qualifying adjectives and clauses that are so easy to throw in. Avoid slang, cliches, and colloquialisms: i.e. don't write like ya'll talk, now. Write complete sentences. Spell properly. Organize your thoughts before you begin composing. Revise for clarity, smoothness, and correct form. Write in the active voice, and use positive rather than negative constructions. Type your reports and proofread it before turn it in. The report will be graded on form as well as content.
10. **Timetable**. A step by step timetable for producing the report will help those who leave everything until the last minute!
 - A. **Choose your book**—within the first three weeks of the semester.
 - B. **First draft**—due two weeks before deadline. Your first draft need not be typed. Meeting this important deadline is worth five of the one hundred point total. The first draft will not be graded but only check that you have produced it. Only if you leave yourself sufficient time for revising this draft will you actually do the revision.
 - C. **Final draft**. Revise for clarity and smoothness; use transitions, active voice, no contractions. (You may ink in corrections.)