How to Write a History Book Review

Summarized from The University of Iowa, Teaching and Writing Center

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

1. Lay out an author’s argument
2. Critique the historical argument.

Note: It is not a book report. You need to do more than simply lay out the contents and 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.

HOW TO:

1. Before you read the book find out about the author’s prior work.
   1. 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?
2. As you read….
   1. Write a few sentences about the author’s approach or genre of history. Is the focus on Gender, Class, Race, Politics, Something else?
   2. Summarize the author’s subject and argument. Here you provide context. What is the time period? What are the major events happening at the time? How does this fit? What are the starting/ending dates for the book’s narrative? What is the major thesis or theses for the book (look in the introduction)?
   3. What is the structure of the book? How are chapters organized? Thematically, chronologically, or some other way?
   4. What evidence is the author using to prove the argument? Is it based on narrative, data or other evidence? Are they providing full evidence? Are they ignoring other evidence? Do they address conflicting evidence? If so, then how? Try to support this with specific citations from the book. This is where you get into deep analysis. Also look at the evidence used by the author. Is it primary source evidence? Is the author doing full analysis of the sources? What about secondary sources? Have they looked at other historical analysis of the primary sources? Does the author rely more on primary or secondary sources?
   5. Is the argument convincing? Does s/he make the argument? Provide evidence to support your points here.

YOUR REVIEW:

* Paragraph 1. Introduce the author, the historical period and the topic of the book. Tell the reader (me) what genre of history this work belongs to and what approach the author has used.
* Paragraphs 2 and 3. Here is your analysis….What are the strengths and weaknesses in the book and/or the argument. Provide specific evidence to support your points. Refer to the reviews you have already read.
* Paragraph 4. Conclusion…what are your overall recommendations.

Your review should be 2 full pages typed, double spaced in 12 point Times New Roman Font. Your header should simply be on one line with your name and the title of the book.