

Writing a book review

This learning activity is designed to support the development of a book review from long at what is a book review, through to analyzing other books reviews, testing how well you can review a book through to the finished product.

The first stage before you even start to work out what is needed is to get an idea of the flavor of book reviews written for a journal as they may or may not be as formal as a research paper.

Activity 1 Analyzing book reviews

Read through several book reviews which have been published by the journal you want to write submit to or journals in the same subject area. The aim behind this is to see how they are written, what is the order of the materials, who are the reviews aimed at and other features that make up a book review, what makes a good book review, are they critical or uncritical? Does the journal have a specified format or word limit for a book review? What do you need to include as a minimum about the book including; author, publisher and ISBN.

Once you have looked at a number of book reviews you need to have a look at the resources to help you write a review. For a good overview of writing a book review go to “How to write a book review” by Bill Asenjo (<http://www.writing-world.com/freelance/asenjo.shtml>).

Journals themselves are a vital source of information for example the short guide from Evaluation and Program Planning, published by Elsevier (<https://www.journals.elsevier.com/evaluation-and-program-planning/policies/instructions-for-book-reviews-in-epp>), see Figure 1 below. The Book review or review editor of a journal will likely be interested in you writing a review so do get in touch with them, as Feinstein advises for TaylorFrancis (2017) “Writing book reviews is often a good way to begin academic writing. It can help you get your name known in your field, and give you valuable experience of publishing before you write a full-length article.”

Guidelines for Book Reviewers

Policy on Book Reviews

Evaluation and Program Planning is committed to bringing new technical knowledge and new intellectual perspectives to members of the evaluation community. In furtherance of this commitment we publish book reviews by authors who are ensconced in the evaluation community, and also by authors whose activity is at a remove from evaluation, but whose work has something to say to those who do, teach, or interact with evaluation. We work with book reviewers who share our commitment.

Editorial Guidelines

- *Book reviews should cover the following topics. (These do not have to be section headings, but the content does need to appear.)*
- *Review of the book’s content and scope.*

- *Contribution the book makes to evaluation work.*
- *Identification of any controversial stances the author/s may take.*
- *Level of expertise and knowledge required by the reader to appreciate the book's content.*
- *Identification of the paradigmatic or intellectual perspectives in which the work is grounded.*
- *Discussion of the type/s of evaluation work and evaluation setting/s for which the book would be useful.*

Operations

- *EPP adheres to the latest edition of the American Psychological Association's style manual. Please see the guide for authors for full details on how to format and submit your paper.*
- *Reviews should include specification of the publisher, author, number of pages, date of publication, and price as appropriate for hard cover, soft cover, and electronic editions.*
- *The length of reviews can vary as the reviewer sees fit, but as a general guideline, we expect reviews to be between 1,000 and 2,500 words long, as the reviewer deems appropriate.*

wikiHow presents a good short guide to work through including a review template though individual journals and book review editors may have their own guides for their journal. As wikihow expresses it "Writing a book review is not just about summarizing; it's also an opportunity for you to present a critical discussion of the book. As a reviewer, you should combine an accurate, analytical reading with a strong, personal response. A good book review describes what is on the page, analyzes how the book tried to achieve its purpose, and expresses any reactions and arguments from a unique perspective."

(<http://www.wikihow.com/Write-a-Book-Review>). The web page takes you through the process step by step from Part 1: Preparing to write your review, to Part 2: Creating a first draft of the review to Part 3: Polishing the review.

Activity 2 Undertaking a practice review and comparing with a published review.

When you are ready find a book in your library or personal collection that you use regularly and that has already been reviewed. You can look up book reviews using Scholar or LibraryPlus just as you can look for references. Then write up your own review of the book and once you have completed it compare it to one that has been published. Did you think the same as the original reviewer? Were there things you added that they missed? Was your review as good or would it have needed more work before publication?

As you go through your practice book review try using the list of 10 simple questions from Table 1. The stage above could be missed out but can be useful to gain confidence in writing a review.

1. What is the book's main argument?
2. Does the book do what it says it is going to do in the title and the introduction?
3. Does the book provide a valuable contribution to the field or discipline?
4. Does the book relate to a current debate or development in the field? if so, how?

5. Is the information in the book accurate? (Reference footnotes/endnotes, bibliographical details and dates, but don't become obsessed with the detail!)
6. Is the book well-written?
7. If maps and illustrations have been used, are these useful? If they have not been used, should they have been?
8. What is the book's target audience? Are they academics, research students, undergraduates or interested readers?
9. If the target audience is made up of undergraduates, which modules, courses or disciplines would this book best serve?
10. How does the book compare with other books in the field/ make a reference to other key contributors.

Table 1. Ten simple questions to bear in mind as you read and review the book:

Activity 3 Review a book

Find a recently published book that hasn't already been reviewed in your journal of choice. If your journal has a Book Review editor it might be that they have books they could send you to review or who you could ask if the book you want to review would be useful so as not to clash with someone else writing a review. If the book comes from a larger collection of similar books a more general review article could be useful, see the review "Reflection bookshelf" by Bryson (2011) on books about reflection in practice.

As you come to produce your draft and final version of your book review it is worth looking through Robert Hudson's series of "Does and don'ts to book reviewing" which are very helpful and provide excellent advice from an academic who has written and edited many books and book reviews.

Does and don'ts to book reviewing

Read the book Do make sure that you read the book that you have been commissioned to review. You would be surprised at the number of people who privately admit to just skimming through their books when preparing book reviews, or just reading the chapters which are of particular interest to their own academic field. Would you appreciate it if somebody were to write a research report or assess your work based on just a cursory glance at what you had written?

Active reading not passive Read the book actively, with pen and paper to hand! Annotate each chapter as you read through the book. Underline key points in the text that you might refer to in your review, and pencil in marginalia as you go along, this can be really helpful in the process of producing the first draft of your book review. If reading using an e-book you can add notes as you go along and then export these as a collection at the end of reading.

Close, careful and annotated reading Stop frequently as you read the book to summarise arguments and themes raised in each section and aim to make clear statements of the book's argument and purpose, as well as your own responses to this. Sometimes, you can use the author's or editor's introduction as a guide or framework in helping to draft the first copy of your review article. Also a closer reading of the book, rather than the cursory skim, might provide you with some useful clues that will help you in putting your review together, because you need to explain to your reader exactly what type of book this is.

The book's market Also, consider the market that the book may be aimed for. Is this likely to appeal to undergraduates, post-graduates, the interested general reader or scholars, and which fields, disciplines, multi-disciplinary and inter-disciplinary areas is this book likely to appeal to?

Is it better or worse or does it add to the field it is entering? Compare the book with the rest of field, as you might do in providing a literature review in your thesis, though obviously not in such detail. In other words, make reference to the key authors and their works in your chosen field and consider where this book differs from the rest of the field and where it fits in. Is it cutting edge research? Is it pushing the boundaries? Is it timely or is it dated? What is its originality and is it a major contribution to the field?

How critical do you want to be or are suggestions for a future edition better? In the early days of your writing career, my advice would be not to be too strong in your criticism of other people's books, even if you loathe what you have just read. If you choose to criticise the book, make sure that you are being fair and that your criticism is firmly-grounded and just. Give clear and sound reasons for your criticism. Be aware that an unfavourable review can quite easily rebound and turn against you. You might find yourself in turn getting criticised in the academic press by the book's author or editor, to say nothing of what might be said about you off the record. Are you sure that you want to gain a difficult or unsavoury reputation so early in your career? Do you really want to make enemies so soon? Remember, you too will be judged one day, and there might well be some 'young Turk' who takes a pot-shot at your writing in the future. Also, imagine that you are reviewing an edited book with chapters that have been penned by all the key personalities from your chosen field - a broadside attack from you, at such an early stage in your career could easily turn against you and could, indeed, be academically fatal!

Re-read If you have the time, once you have written your book review, it is always worthwhile re-reading the book again, or at least its salient chapters to make sure that what you have written is still accurate, fair and to the point.

Can you meet the deadline for a journal edition? You may have restraints imposed upon you in terms of deadlines and word limits. If you are not going to meet the deadline, both courtesy and practicality dictate that you should let the review editor or journal editor know beforehand, as the delay of even a book review can impact on the journal's own planning and deadlines, especially if it is a weekly or monthly publication.

Polish your work With regard to word limits, you will find that with the book review, there will be a tendency to over-write in the first instance, so you will probably have to cut down your length quite considerably by several severe edits. This might entail a process of constantly reading and re-reading your work and trimming it down in terms of length. Also, as you edit the review, you should hopefully reach an epiphany, that wonderful moment when you realise that what you have written is just right and hits the spot. But, in most cases, this moment can only come with constant editing.

Not the same as other types of writing Writing a book review is a totally different kind of venture to other publishing experiences because the key to success is on brevity,

conciseness and precision. It can be a very pleasant kind of writing activity when it really works.

Starting point for a career in writing If you produce a commendable piece of work, you may be invited to produce more book reviews for the journal. This could even lead to a flurry of contributions, so that you might end up being that journal's expert on your chosen field of study. Just think how good that would be for your career. It is a great feeling when editors start approaching you rather than vice versa.

References

Feinstein, J. (2017) Becoming a book reviewer. Taylor&Francis; AuthorServices. [URI <http://authorservices.taylorandfrancis.com/becoming-a-book-reviewer/> accessed February 9th 2017]

Bryson, D. (2011) The Reflection Bookshelf. *Journal of Visual Communication in Medicine* 34; 122–23, doi:10.3109/17453054.2011.605056.