

How to Write a Book Critique

PURPOSE OF THE ASSIGNMENT: The idea behind this assignment is to give you the opportunity to read a detailed psychological account on a particular subject and to analyze the book critically. The paper you will be writing should be a book *critique*, rather than a book *report*. In a book report, you simply summarize the book. In a book critique, you go much further - you analyze and evaluate the book.

WHAT A BOOK CRITIQUE SHOULD INCLUDE: There are many things you should do in a good book critique. How much attention you give to these different components of the critique may vary depending on the book you are analyzing.

1. **Summarize the book.** Yes, despite what I said above about the difference between a book report and a critique, you nonetheless need to do some summarizing in your critique. You need to describe what the book is about in enough detail that someone who has not read the book has a clear idea of the topic the author is addressing, the parameters of the book, and how the book is organized. If you do not give your reader some idea what the book is about, then you may lose your reader when you start analyzing the book. Note that a chapter-by-chapter summary of the book is not needed. A general summary of the main points will be sufficient.

2. **Identify the author's purpose.** What does your author want to accomplish with this book? What audience is the book intended for? Your author may want to fill a gap in psychological literature by examining a topic that other psychologists have neglected, or your author may have an interpretation of the chosen subject that differs substantially from previous books on the subject - your author is trying to *accomplish* something with the book; you need to figure out what it is!

3. **Identify the author's theme or themes.** During the course of the book, the author will probably develop several themes. Does the author have an issue that he or she keeps raising? A point or idea that recurs throughout the book? These are the author's themes - arguments that the author particularly wants to emphasize.

4. **Identify the Thesis:** The main point the author is trying to prove is the thesis of the book. You should always explain the author's thesis.

5. **Note where the author stands on controversial issues.** Sometimes, the author will make this easy for you, by describing the various positions historians have taken on the topic, and then explaining his or her position on the issue. Professional reviews of books will often point out these controversial issues and will compare your author's position to that of others who have written on the same topic.

6. **Discuss your author's sources.** What types of *secondary* sources does your author use? Are some of the sources current? What languages are the sources written in? What types of *primary* sources does the author use? Are potentially biased sources treated with appropriate caution? Does your author neglect any important relevant sources (again, professional reviews will be useful here)? In cases where there may be conflicting views on an issue, does your author examine sources from all sides?

7. **Find out relevant biographical information about your author.** Is your author trained as a psychologist? What higher degrees does your author hold - from what schools and in what fields? What is your author's area of specialization? Is your author associated with any "school" of psychology? Are there any aspects of your author's professional or personal life that might affect his or her assumptions or conclusions? You need only discuss those aspects of your author's life and career that are *relevant* to his or her performance as an psychologist - I do not need to know the names of her four dogs or that his hobby is bungee sumo wrestling. Remember - give the source(s) where you find out information about your author.

7. **Look up professional reviews of your book.** The book reviews published in professional psychological journals will be written by psychologists who specialize in the area the book addresses. Accordingly, the reviewers will know far more about the author's topic than you, and they are more likely to recognize important new theories, logical flaws, factual errors, etc. It is important to know how a book has been received by other professionals whose specializations are relevant to the book's subject. Remember to read a book review with the same critical attention that you used when reading the book itself - when a reviewer disagrees with the author of the book on an issue, it is entirely possible that the author is correct and the reviewer wrong. Note that looking up reviews on Amazon.com or a similar site is not particularly helpful since there is no editorial control over any of those reviews. Use the resources of the library's reference room (like the online database JSTOR, *Book Review Index* and *Book Review Digest*) to track down professional reviews of your book. When looking through these indexes of reviews, do not just check the year your book was published - check a year or two after as well (scholarly journals tend to lag behind in their reviews).

8. **Address any other issues that affect the book's quality.** There are various other issues that you may want to discuss, issues that will be more relevant in some cases than in others. How is the book organized? What do you think of the author's writing style? Does the author include "scholarly paraphernalia" like an index, maps, glossaries, appendices, etc.? Should the author have included more maps, diagrams, or whatever? While these issues may be worth discussing in your critique, generally they should not absorb too much of your time. After all, once you have told me that you think the author's writing style is confusing or colorless or whatever how much more can you say on the subject without repeating yourself?

FORMAT OF THE PAPER: This type of paper often runs *at least* two typed, double-spaced pages. If your first draft comes out shorter than that, it's a pretty good guess you are not doing something you need to be doing! You can include a cover sheet if you want to, but it is not necessary. You should follow APA formatting style while you write your critique. Make sure you proofread your paper carefully - bad grammar will count against you. Use your word processor's spelling checker, look for sentence fragments, read the paper out loud to listen for awkward phrasing, have a friend read through it, etc., etc., etc.