

BOOK & ARTICLE REVIEWS

(How to Write)

The word **review** has many meanings. Students in Higher Education may be expected to write **Literature Reviews**, for which there is a separate leaflet available.

This leaflet is about **book reviews**. Much of it may also be applied to reviews of films, radio and TV programmes, and so on; but for most people in Higher Education, it is usually books that are reviewed. The assumption here is that most university assignments (outside Departments of Literature, Film Studies, Modern Languages and so on) are to review academic books, or articles.

Students are sometimes asked to write a review of a book as an assignment, often fairly early in the course. What is a **review** in this sense? What is the purpose of such a task in an assignment? How do you write a good one? This leaflet tries to answer these questions.

What is a review?

The *Oxford English Dictionary* gives this definition of **review** (*n.*) [meaning **7. a.**]: “A general account or criticism of a literary work, a musical or dramatic performance, etc. (esp. new or recent) either published separately or, more usually, as an article in a periodical or newspaper”. The primary purposes of such a review, in periodicals, are to **inform** and to **evaluate**. That is also true of reviews in academic work. The level of information in a review published in an academic journal may be higher than in a daily newspaper, but the essential job remains the same: to tell the reader about the book, at an appropriate level. Equally, any recommendation given in the evaluation must be adapted to suit the readers of the review; but evaluation remains essentially the same job wherever it is written.

You can see examples of academic reviews in your subject in most issues of most of the journals. If you haven't already done so, you should read some – not necessarily in any great depth – to learn the style in which, and the level at which, they are written. If you are a first year student, you cannot expect to write work fit for the journals – but that is the goal towards which you should be working. You should also be sure to read some reviews in the daily and weekend newspapers (the serious ones) to see how the same basic format differs in different publications.

Why write a review?

For most students, the immediate answer is ‘as an exercise’, or ‘because I was told to for my assignment.’ In some cases, it is not much more than showing their tutors that they have read the book, and put some thought into thinking about it and the issues it raises. But never forget that, in addition to that, you are aspiring to the model of the academically published review: an exercise is only preparation for ‘the real thing’. So what is the purpose of the real thing?

As mentioned above, it is “to **inform** and to **evaluate**”. The job of **information** is increasingly necessary (though unlikely to form any part of an undergraduate exercise in reviewing, where the reader normally knows more than the writer). Given the vast number of books published every year, readers must be able to pick what they are going to read. Academic readers, reading for the purpose of teaching and learning, need to be aware of what has recently appeared in their subjects, if only to know that a particular book is about a detail of the subject that does NOT interest or concern them, and they do not need to waste time reading it. They might be glad to know that Professor X – who is always stimulating – has got a new book out; they might be sorry to hear that Dr Y, who is never interesting, has published yet another repetitive tome. They might therefore want to make the time to read Professor X's; they might reluctantly decide that they have to make time to read Dr Y's (because it

is an important piece of fundamental research). Good reviews will help them decide the appropriate priorities and strategies in their own lives.

The busy academic researcher wants not only to know what has been published, but also whether it is good enough to be worth the effort of obtaining it and reading it. This is where **evaluation** comes in. (It is also usually the primary purpose of a student exercise, where the assignment may well have been set with the aim of helping the learner to develop appropriate standards and methods of professional judgement – it is part of training the student to read in the academic way.) In its crudest sense, the review answers the question, “Is this book any good?” Sometimes, where different students in a group read different books, the point is, at least partly, to share knowledge of different texts among the whole group.

Key elements of a review

Remember the **purpose** outlined above. Remember the **audience** (or **readership**) for whom you are writing. (**Purpose** and **readership** should be near the front of most writers’ minds if they want to write a good piece of writing – whether or not it is a Review.) If you are one in a group that have been asked to read one article each and write a review for the group, it is a way of approaching a variety of texts without too much reading for any individual student. So your evaluation may matter to others as well as yourself. You may want to enthuse about a book or article because it is so right – or so witty – or so new to you; you may wish to recommend others not to read it, because it is so old-fashioned [does that make it bad?] – or so dull – or so wrong. Whatever your judgement, express it clearly and honestly, without prejudice. This is part of the skills in **judgement** and **weighing up the evidence** you should be developing as a student of your subject in Higher Education.

Start with information. It is conventional for the bibliographical details (author’s name, *Title of book*, publisher information and date of publication, etc) to be placed at the beginning of the review, to make sure that the reader knows what it is talking about. (In reality, we often use this information to help us decide whether we even want to read the review, never mind the book.) After these formalities, it may help to get you started to give some more information, such as the broad topic of the book (the application of artificial intelligence to computer-controlled traffic lights, for example; the shipbuilding techniques of the Elizabethan navy; developments in the genetic studies of insects; or the decline of a particular industry in one country, or worldwide). Expand this in such a way as to prove that you have read it properly. It may be appropriate to outline the conclusions the author reaches; it may be more valuable to outline the methods used to reach them.

If you have enough space, you can do both – and more. It may be more helpful to you in writing the review to summarise the credentials of the author: “Mrs Z has been teaching this at Harvard for ten years, and has published widely in the Journals”; “Smith [it is sometimes easier in academic life to use just the surname of the author, with no title. This way, you can avoid certain discomforts of sexist language] has devoted a lifetime to the sex-life of the nematode worm” “Professor W has been recognised as the foremost authority on the Irish rebellion of 1798 for the last decade”. None of these forms a sufficient basis to construct a review in itself; but each may offer you a way of beginning, and lead you to consider the value of the book you are reviewing.

After these preliminaries, consider the real matters:

- Is the book accessible, and if so, to whom?
- Is it really ‘an easy book for first-year students’, as the blurb says?
- Is it as advertised, a “Comprehensive account of the topic”?
- Is it interesting (in the academic sense; it probably won’t be thrilling in the same way as an airport novel, and it probably shouldn’t be)?

- Does it prove what it is saying in a way that is regarded as respectable in your subject?
- Does the author write in a theoretical way, or in a strictly practical way about the real world? If the latter, does he/she seem to know and reflect real life?
- What are the new points (to you) in the teaching that is done, the knowledge and ideas that are imparted?
- What seems to be a new interpretation, or a new theory, in the writing? (Why was it written if all it is doing is repeating familiar ideas? Or, if it was written in order to supply a round-up of the best contemporary knowledge of the field, does it make the familiar interesting?)

These are a few of the questions you might consider. Do not try to answer them all, particularly in a short review (1,000 words or fewer); and if you can find better questions, ask those instead. If your assignment is to write a review, write rough notes as you read the book the first time, jotting down things that strike you (don't understand Ch 5 AT ALL', or 'knows a lot of hist., & some good comparisons to similar events', 'striking photos of bacteria' or 'no mention of Picasso'. Even 'Polymath!' or 'know-all' might be enough to get you started.) You may find a good quotation that you want to copy into your notes, for use in the review – 'I never understood this theory before I read this brilliant sentence "xxxxx": clear and concise.' In the other direction, you could say 'long-winded – e.g. sent. starts p5, finishes p.7'.

This is because a key aspect for which your reader (the tutor who set the assignment) is looking at your ability to support your judgement with **evidence**. If you think the book is written in a lively style, give an example that makes clearer exactly what you mean. If you think the writer has covered the subject in great depth, you may want to quote from the Table of Contents – or at least give a few examples of Chapter headings. If you think the author has got some judgement wrong (or right), try to analyse where the weaknesses (or strengths) of the argument lie. If you spot an error, draw the reader's attention to it (unless it is a merely typographical mistake or an unfortunate turn of phrase). If it forms part of a debate that is continuing in your subject, as for example the legal and political position of 'whistle-blowers' in the UK, or the causes of the rise of the Nazi party in Germany, or the nutritional benefits of certain diets, then try to show where the book you are reviewing fits into the pattern as a whole. Show off your knowledge of the other literature in the field.

Useful things that might be included in a Review

The **date of publication** may be more significant in some subjects than others. Physical sciences in general and medical sciences in particular, change far more rapidly than some sorts of work in history or literature. It is reasonable for a scholar in an ancient language to spend twenty years working on an edition of a major author: one hopes that most doctors who publish on a new treatment for a certain treatment may have shared the benefits, even if only in a preliminary form, rather sooner than twenty years after the first idea. It may be significant to mention the **edition**, perhaps together with some account of earlier editions: "This is a completely re-written account of the book first published in 1970, which has been through six editions already", or "A new edition of [*name of book*] has appeared almost annually since 19XX; the latest differs only in detail from the last." To say such things, of course, requires you to have looked with some care at the edition before the present one.

An account not only of the **contents** but perhaps the **scope** may be useful to your reader: "This history of India during British rule looks at the religious conflicts that arose between ... and The author has chosen not to look at confrontations between any other religious groups" and "This survey of common diseases of wheat covers those that are caused by pathogens, and does not consider deficiencies in trace elements." These two also show the possibility of mentioning the **limitations and deficiencies** of the book you are reviewing. Make it clear where you think the writer has omitted an important point (perhaps you hoped for the answer to a question to which there is none), and where he/she has deliberately chosen to draw the line in her researches (the Introduction may say specifically that such-and-such a matter has not been covered, or that it is intended to produce a later study of one aspect of the subject, "which is not therefore covered here"). In this context, it is also worth considering the **depth and method of**

the research that underlies the book. “Professor X seems to have read everything”, or “This study relies on secondary research” may be appropriate comments, as it might be to point out that there may be differences in other countries, or at other dates, which may tend to invalidate some of the author’s findings.

It may be useful to include an account of the state of learning in the area to which the book contributes – a form of miniature **literature review**. “The latest in a series, this book examines a very small corner of the whole field of English medieval building, the roofing of churches in East Anglia” and “Since Crick and Watson first established that the DNA molecule was formed in a double helix, a whole new subject has come into being. This book attempts a survey of the whole field” show that books may have very different parts to play in **scholarship**. First year undergraduate students may not be able to say much about this, of course; but all students should be alert to try to show that they know at least something. Mention any other work in the field of which you are aware. Apply what you know to the book you are reviewing. “This book makes a significant contribution to our knowledge (or at least mine)” might be a helpful formula. Aim to show how the book you have read fits into the pattern of what you have been learning in the course for which you are writing.

Say something about the **style** in which the book is written if it has struck you in any way. (If you haven’t noticed it, that in itself maybe a good thing in academic writing: a textbook should be ‘transparent’, allowing readers to concentrate on its content, not its literary qualities.) The evidence that you use to discuss style should include a direct quotation of something in the book: “The author’s style is very hard to read. I found this sentence incomprehensible even after twenty readings, and discussion with classmates revealed this feeling to be widespread” on the one hand, and “The author presents important ideas in a few well-chosen words, as for example when he sums up the doctrine of the Trinity in these five words: ‘uuu vvv xxx yyy zzz’.” Here you may like to revert to the idea of the **readership** (see above): “This may be appropriate for a school text-book, but seems simplistic in the context of an Engineering degree”, or “It is refreshing to find ideas presented clearly in a way that the second year student may be expected to understand, rather than the convoluted prose of ...” may offer you a model.

Remember that you are in Higher Education in order to develop professional skills, not to express your personality. The opinions you give should be such as are to be expected in your subject. It is foolish for Law students, for example, to complain of the tedium of statutes; statutes are written with enormous care to be accurate and comprehensive, not to be interesting. You might have preferred to be reviewing the latest best-selling thriller, but that will not make you a professional lawyer. You can agree or disagree with a tutor in the Department on the quality of a piece of academic writing; but only on grounds that are accepted in the subject. You might have a good point in finding fault with the statistical methods of sampling used in a piece of social science research. This would be legitimate in a review. But it is not part of your professional studies to attack the political affiliations of the author’s family - unless you can show that it has led her to a biased account of the topic.

Finally – good luck with your assignment. Treat it as a learning experience, and a road to better knowledge of your subject. And treat this leaflet as a learning experience. It has only given you suggestions. You should be developing the confidence to write within the bounds laid down by your profession.