

Why Write a Book Review?

Writing book reviews is not only the easiest and quickest route to publication, it is a good way to improve your writing skills, develop your analytical skills, learn how the journal publishing process works, and get to know editors. Since some libraries can't buy books unless they have been reviewed and many individuals won't buy books unless they have read a review, reviewing books can definitely advance your field. Indeed, scholars in smaller fields sometimes get together and assign books for review so that every book published in their field is reviewed somewhere. Just remember that book reviews do not "count" as much on a curriculum vitae as an academic essay. If you are doing more than two book reviews a year, you may be spending too much time on book reviews and not enough on your other writing.

Choosing a Book

Think about what kind of book would be most useful to you in writing your dissertation, finalizing a paper for publication, or passing your exams. Since book reviews do take time, like any writing, it is best to choose a book that will work for you twice, as a publication and as research. Alternatively, some recommend that graduate students focus on reviewing textbooks or anthologies, since such reviews take less background knowledge and editors can find it difficult to find people willing to do such reviews. Although the traditional book review is of one book, editors will often welcome book reviews that address two or more related books—called a review essay.

Choose a book that (1) is in your field, (2) is on a topic for which you have sound background knowledge, (3) has been published in the past two or three years, and (4) has been published by a reputable publisher (i.e., any press affiliated with a university or large commercial presses).

Books on hot topics are often of special interest to editors. It can also be rewarding to pick an obscure but useful book in order to bring attention to it. To avoid complications, it is best not to review books written by your advisor, spouse, or ex!

To identify a suitable book in your field:

- Look up the call number of the favorite book in your field and go to the stacks of your university library. Do a shelf search around the call number to see if anything similar or related has been published in the past couple of years.
- Go to any book database—your university library on-line, Worldcat, Amazon.com, the Library of Congress—and search using two or three keywords related to your field (e.g., Chicano fiction, Chicana politics, Latino demographics, Latina high school education) to find books in your area.
- Read magazines that review books before publication—such as Choice, Library Journal, or Kirkus Reviews—to get a sense for interesting books that will be coming out. You can get copies of books for review before they are published. Editors especially like reviews of just published books.
- Read those academic journals that list books recently received for review or recently published in their area.
- Ask faculty members in your department for recommendations.

Once you have identified several books, locate copies and skim them. Pick the book that seems the strongest. Do not pick a book that has major problems or with which you disagree violently. As a graduate student, you do not have the protection of tenure and may one day be evaluated by the person whose book you put to the ax. If you really feel strongly that you must write a negative review of a certain book, go ahead and write the review. Academia is, after all, quite oedipal and young scholars do sometimes make their reputations by deflating those who came before them. Just realize that going on record in such a public way may have consequences.

Choosing a Journal

Identify several leading journals in your field that publish book reviews. One way to do this is to search an on-line article database or something like Book Review Digest, if your library has access. Using several key words from your field, limit your search to book reviews and note the journals where the results were published.

Before starting to write your review, contact the book review editor of one of the journals. This is important standard practice; in particular because most journals do not accept unsolicited reviews. You do not want to write an entire review of a book and send it to a journal, only to be told that they don't accept unsolicited reviews or that a review of that very book is to appear in the next issue.

So, send a short e-mail to book review editors at prospective journals (most journals have websites with such information) identifying the book you would like to review and your qualifications for reviewing it. This e-mail need not be longer than two sentences: "I am writing to find out if you would welcome a review from me of

[*Book Title*], edited by [editor] and published in 2012 by [publisher]. I am currently writing my dissertation at Stanford on the history of the field of [name of a field related to book]."

Another reason why you want to contact the book review editor is that they often can get you the book for free. Publishers frequently send books for review straight to journals or, if the book editor directly contacts them, straight to you. Of course, you don't need to wait for the book to start your review if you have access to a library copy. If you get a free book, make sure to write the review. A book review editor will never send you another book if you don't deliver on the first.

If the book review editor says yes, they would like a review of the book from you, make sure to ask if the journal has any book review submission guidelines. In particular, you want to make sure you understand how long their book reviews tend to be.

If the book review editor says the book is already under review, move on to your next journal choice or ask the editor if they have any books on the topic that they would like reviewed. You are under no obligation to review a book they suggest, just make sure to get back to them with a decision. It is perfectly acceptable to say "Thanks for the suggestion, I've decided to focus on writing my prospectus/dissertation."

Reading the Book

It is best, when writing a book review, to be an active reader of the book. Sit at a desk with pen and paper in hand. As you read, stop frequently to summarize the argument, to note particularly clear statements of the book's argument or purpose, and to describe your own responses. If you have read in this active way, putting together the book review should be quick and straightforward. Some people prefer to read at the computer, but if you're a good typist, you often start typing up long quotes from the book instead of analyzing it. Paper and pen provides a little friction to prevent such drifting.

Take particular note of the title (does the book deliver what the title suggests it is going to deliver?), the table of contents (does the book cover all the ground it says it will?), the preface (often the richest source of information about the book), and the index (is it accurate, broad, deep?).

Some questions to keep in mind as you are reading:

- What is the book's argument?
 - Does the book do what it says it is going to do?
 - Is the book a contribution to the field or discipline?
 - Does the book relate to a current debate or trend in the field and if so, how?
 - What is the theoretical lineage or school of thought out of which the book rises?
 - Is the book well-written?
 - What are the book's terms and are they defined?
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- How accurate is the information (e.g., the footnotes, bibliography, dates)?
 - Are the illustrations helpful? If there are no illustrations, should there have been?
 - Who would benefit from reading this book?
 - How does the book compare to other books in the field?
 - If it is a textbook, what courses can it be used in and how clear is the book's structure and examples?

It can be worthwhile to do an on-line search to get a sense for the author's history, other books, university appointments, graduate advisor, and so on. This can provide you with useful context..

Making a Plan

Book reviews are usually 600 to 2,000 words in length. It is best to aim for about 1,000 words, as you can say a fair amount in 1,000 words without getting bogged down. There's no point in making a book review into a 20-page masterpiece since the time would have been better spent on an academic essay that would count for more on your c.v.

Some say a review should be written in a month: two weeks reading the book, one week planning your review, and one week writing it.

Although many don't write an outline for an essay, you should really try to outline your book review before you write it. This will keep you on task and stop you from straying into writing an academic essay.

Classic book review structure is as follows:

- Title including complete bibliographic citation for the work (i.e., title in full, author, place, publisher, date of publication, edition statement, pages, special features [maps, color plates, etc.], price, and ISBN.
- One paragraph identifying the thesis, and whether the author achieves the stated purpose of the book.
- One or two paragraphs summarizing the book.
- One paragraph on the book's strengths.
- One paragraph on the book's weaknesses.
- One paragraph on your assessment of the book's strengths and weaknesses.

Writing the Review

Once you've read the book, try to spend no more than one or two weeks writing the review. Allowing a great deal of time to fall between reading the book and writing about it is unfair to you and the author. The point of writing something short like a book review is to do it quickly. Sending a publication to a journal is always scary, sitting on the review won't make it less so.

Avoiding Five Common Pitfalls

1. Evaluate the text, don't just summarize it. While a succinct restatement of the text's points is important, part of writing a book review is making a judgment. Is the book a contribution to the field? Does it add to our knowledge? Should this book be read and by whom? One needn't be negative to evaluate; for instance, explaining how a text relates to current debates in the field is a form of evaluation.
2. Do not cover everything in the book. In other words, don't use the table of contents as a structuring principle for your review. Try to organize your review around the book's argument or your argument about the book.
3. Judge the book by its intentions not yours. Don't criticize the author for failing to write the book you think that he or she should have written. As John Updike puts it, "Do not imagine yourself the caretaker of any tradition, an enforcer of any party standards, a warrior in any ideological battle, a corrections officer of any kind."
4. Likewise, don't spend too much time focusing on gaps. Since a book is only 200 to 500 pages, it cannot possibly address the richness of any topic. For this reason, the most common criticism in any review is that the book doesn't address some part of the topic. If the book purports to be about ethnicity and film and yet lacks a chapter on Latinos, by all means, mention it. Just don't belabor the point. Another tic of reviewers is to focus too much on books the author did not cite. If you are using their bibliography just to display your own knowledge it will be obvious to the reader. Keep such criticisms brief.
5. Don't use too many quotes from the book. It is best to paraphrase or use short telling quotes within sentences.

Tips for Academic Book Reviewers

1. Reviewing books maintains one's sense of being part of a larger, longer, scholarly conversation. It should be as much of a regular responsibility of academic life as peer reviewing (relative to opportunity). And like peer reviewing, it needs to be approached with greater care than it is sometimes afforded.
2. Everyone should write book reviews, at all academic career stages. It's not just a practice recommended for graduate students needing free books. It keeps one in the habit of close, critical, cover-to-cover reading. And what of the probable response: that contemporary academic work is structured in ways that make the continued cultivation of this habit unachievable? That may be so for many of us at many times. If we concede that across the board, however, then we acquiesce to the very transformation of universities that we often lament.
3. Conflicts of interest, actual or perceived, are best avoided. Book reviewers should disclose anything that could be viewed as such. I have reviewed friends' books before, to try to lend support to and foster engagement with colleagues' and collaborators' work. Upon reflection though, I should not have done so because of the possible perception that I might benefit professionally from advances in my co-authors' and collaborators' careers, and that my judgment might be coloured accordingly. I might instead have facilitated reviews of these books by someone at a greater distance from their authors. Of particular importance among conflicts is the following: think very carefully before reviewing a book in which your own work features prominently. If there

is any reference to your work in the book you're reviewing, let it pass. Use of the first-person voice can be refreshing, but a book review ought not to revolve predominantly around the reviewer. Professor Leslie Green's 2020 review of a section of Professor Joanne Conaghan's 2013 book (to which Conaghan offered a patient response) is illustrative of the kinds of perils that can be associated with dwelling, as a reviewer, on the treatment of one's own work in the book under review.

4. Attend to power imbalances. If you are an established academic, don't review a first book or a book of an early career researcher with which you fervently disagree. Ordinarily, disagreement can make for engaging writing and productive argument (more on this below).

However, in the context of a power imbalance favouring the reviewer, discord may be misread and could do unintended damage.

5. Foreground the criticism. Keep summary to a minimum. Be sure to make an argument – about the book, but also by reflecting critically on the intervention that it makes in the field, and what it suggests about the state of that field. Be fair, respectful and try to meet the book on its own

terms, but don't shy away from critical engagement. It is a mark of respect for the seriousness of the author's endeavour.

6. Some say one should only review books that one loves. I disagree. My version would be the following: only review books by which you feel provoked, and that seem significant to you. This position counsels against reading books that hold you in their thrall. If you are utterly in awe of a book or its author, that might be a good reason not to review it (gushy reviews can be a tad nauseating). At the same time, it militates against reviewing books that you think are good, but which don't really excite you either positively or negatively. Critique can carry a degree of risk (recall the extraordinary tribulations through which journal editor

Professor Joseph Weiler was put by one disgruntled author).

Nonetheless, a fence-sitting, anodyne review wastes the writer's, editor's and reader's energies and does the author concerned no service at all.

Reviewing books that frustrate you, but that you still regard as important and worthy of attention – this can really help move scholarly argument along.

7. Don't just review 'up' or focus on renowned and established authors.

Seek out lesser-known works to spotlight. If you are bilingual or multilingual, seek out books in a range of languages to pitch to book review editors to help disturb the dominance of English in scholarly publication.

8. Don't send the review to the author, at least not prior to publication.

Don't imagine yourself in direct conversation with the author so much as with the book and its other readers. This does not, of course, override the imperative of being fair.

9. Explore the genre, including the (often undervalued) review essay.

Read widely in it. Approach the genre on its own terms, inspired by those book reviews that you have found most arresting and illuminating as a reader. The *Los Angeles Review of Books*, the *New York Review of Books*, the *London Review of Books*, *Biblio*, the *Paris Review*, the *Singapore Review of Books*, *The New Yorker*, *The Nation* and the *Latin American Research Review* all publish excellent book reviews,