

How to write a book review

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The values and types of reviews

A book review is a special kind of theological writing. Students may be required to write book reviews on prescribed readings. Scholars write reviews of new publications in their field of expertise. Reading reviews is a valuable means of keeping abreast of the vast body of literature being published. So many works are published each year that it is impossible to read every work in a field; by reading good reviews, you can keep track of the latest research.

Book reviews fall into two types: descriptive and critical. Descriptive reviews simply summarise a book. Our interest lies in the critical review. Critical reviews describe and evaluate books. The reviewer critiques it against accepted standards and supports his evaluations with evidence.

The components of a critical review

The first step in doing a book review is to read the book carefully and take notes. You should read it at least twice, preferably with a gap between readings. In your first reading, familiarise yourself with the book and form initial impressions. In the second reading, test your impressions and gather evidence to support your conclusions (Draper 2007).

There are many ways to write a critical review. As a rule, the review should have one central thesis (main point) and should be organised logically to support that thesis (Colford 2000). The review must have four components, which may or may not be used as headings to organise the review:

1. Details of the book

Provide a full bibliographic entry for the book. Include the total number of pages in the book. Some reviews also list the price and ISBN number.

2. Background of the author

Do some research about the author—her qualifications, background, church affiliation, ministry position or experience, previous publications, etc. *Briefly* note anything about the author that sheds light on the book being reviewed (see LAVC 2005).

3. Description of the purpose

The description should *not* be a summary of the book (Colford 2000). Rather, it should extract and state the author's main purpose and thesis (authors often state their purpose in the preface or introduction), then describe how he sets about achieving the purpose and developing the thesis. Those who read your description should have a clear understanding of the book's main purpose and how the author went about achieving it.

4. Evaluation of the book

The longest and most important part of the review is to evaluate the book: (a) How effectively did the author develop his thesis? (b) How well did she achieve her purpose? It is crucial to evaluate the book against the author's stated purpose. If the author set out to write a devotional commentary for teenagers, criticising her for failing to evaluate textual variants is unfair. Similarly, you would not blame someone writing “a layman's guide to Bible doctrines” for leaving out technical data. However, a critical commentary that neglects important variants or an academic monograph that fails to engage critical sources should be exposed.

State how well you believe the author has achieved his purpose, then back up your conclusion with evidence from the book. Here are some criteria you might use to evaluate a theological book:

- *Bible*. Does the author engage scripture adequately? Is her exegesis consistent, thorough and sound?
- *Scholarship*. Does the author demonstrate familiarity with relevant recent scholarship? Does he engage that scholarship appropriately and sufficiently?
- *Presuppositions*. Does the author state his assumptions honestly? Are they appropriate? Does personal bias undermine his objectivity or cloud his judgement?
- *Organisation*. Is the book clearly and logically structured? Does it use suitable structural devices to support its purpose (e.g., tables, indexes, transitions, headings).
- *Methodology*. If it is a research work, is the author's methodology sound and suitable? Did she describe it transparently?
- *Accuracy*. Has the author done thorough research? Did you notice any factual errors? Does she represent others' views fairly and truly?
- *Suitability*. How suitable is the book for its target audience? Is it readable? Is it interesting? Is it useful?
- *Comparisons*. How does the book compare with other works in the field? What contribution does it make? Does it meet accepted norms?
- *Impact*. How did the book affect you? What was your personal response to it?

The language and structure of a review

The tone of your review should reflect a courteous and gracious attitude. Even if you disagree with the author, write in a collegial manner. Many academic debates are conducted in a manner unbecoming of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Scholars use combative language to humiliate those who hold opposite views. I urge you, in all your writings, to treat others as brothers in Christ.

You might structure your review by using the four components as headings (see above), but you need not do so. Many reviewers prefer to weave components 2-4 into a flowing essay. If you write the review in an essay format, it should be arranged around the central thesis of your evaluation and should use the normal three-part structure: introduction, body and conclusion.

- *Introduction.* The opening statement should set the tone for the review. Colford (2000) suggests a statement about either (a) the review's thesis, (b) the author's purpose or (c) the book's significance as good options for the opening sentence.
- *Body.* The body should develop your thesis in a clear, organised manner. It should weave together description and evaluation, providing evidence in support of its judgements.
- *Conclusion.* “The concluding paragraph may sum up or restate your thesis or may make the final judgement regarding the book. No new information or ideas should be introduced in the conclusion” (Colford 2000).

Even if you use the four components as headings, you could still apply this three-part structure to the material under the two main headings, namely, the description and the evaluation.

Summary

Book reviews rank amongst the most valuable types of theological writing. They enable readers to keep abreast of recent trends without needing to read every new work. Although descriptive reviews have some value, critical reviews are much more valuable.

The objective of a book review is to evaluate how well the author has achieved her purpose. The review should describe her purpose and explain how she tried to achieve it. The reviewer should state how well he believes the author has achieved her purpose, supporting his conclusions with evidence from the book.

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