

Reading and Note Taking Strategies¹

When writing a book review of an academic book, it is important to take a critical, yet fair stance. To do so, you must read carefully and pay attention to various key elements of the text. This advice was developed for a graduate writing workshop on writing book reviews for publication. However, it would be equally relevant to writing a book review for a class assignment as either an undergraduate or a graduate student.

GENERAL ADVICE

Read the title and table of contents. Skim quickly through the whole book, glancing over the opening sentences of paragraphs and any visuals to gain a sense of the text's direction and structure. Then, read the whole book from beginning to end. Do not skip around or over the foreword or preface as information contained in these sections may provide useful background information on the author's purpose, experience, and future scholarly goals. Pay particular attention to how the text establishes argument and theoretical/conceptual framework of the book, generally in the introduction or first chapter. If possible, read the entire book twice. The first reading will provide you with an overview and the second will help you focus on specific details in relation to the author's objectives and your own goals as a reader. Take notes as you read. Here, you can record your impressions, reactions, and any questions that may come up over the course of your reading.

SPECIFIC QUESTIONS TO ASK

- What is the book's central argument?
- Why did the author write on this particular subject?
 - To share research results?
 - Explain technicalities within a discipline?
 - Promote a particular viewpoint on the subject?
 - Clarify misconceptions related to a particular theory or regarding a field of research?
 - As a handbook or textbook? What courses can it be used in and how clear is the book's structure and examples?
- Does the book do what it says it is going to do?
- How is the book a contribution to the field or discipline(s)?

¹ Adapted from: (1) Wendy Belcher, "Writing the Academic Book Review" <http://www.wendybelcher.com/pages/documents/WritingtheAcademicBookReview.pdf>; (2) Medical Anthropology Quarterly Reviews Editorial Office, "Reading and Reviewing Scholarly Books" http://www-rohan.sdsu.edu/~anthro/docs/Book_Reviewing_Manual_3_07.pdf



- 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?
- What is the style of writing and does it suit the author's intended audience?
- What are the book's terms and are they defined?
- What types of sources did the author use?
 - Primary? Secondary? Original research? Using what methods?
- How accurate is the information (e.g., the footnotes, bibliography, dates)?
- Are the visuals (images, illustrations, tables, figures, etc.) helpful? If there are no visuals, should there have been?
- Who would benefit from reading this book?
- How does the book compare to other books in the field?

