

Matching Different Reviews of the Same Book with Their Authors

In 2011, psychologist and long-tenured MIT Professor Sherry Turkle published *Alone Together: Why We Expect More of Technology and Less of Each Other*. The culmination of a trilogy of books based on a 30-year research program, *Alone Together* explores how Americans have grown to rely on technology as a substitute for human relationships in both beneficial and detrimental ways. Published by Basic Books (a popular but elite press), *Alone Together* aims to attract a broad, educated audience. As such, it was reviewed by academic journals in a variety of disciplines as well as by popular press outlets such as *The New York Times Book Review* and *Business Week*. Review the provided excerpts from actual reviews of Turkle's book. Try to match them with the types of authors (e.g., grad students, journalists, junior academics) in the second column

Sample Reviewer Comment 1: However, I found her conclusion somewhat perfunctory and unsatisfying. She says she is "cautiously optimistic" about people's ability to put technology in its place. ...But she gives short shrift to how this can realistically be done, and barely addresses the physiological ways the digital world lures us into dopamine-induced loops of time and energy. Perhaps she will write more about this later.

_____ Full
Professor

Sample Reviewer Comment 2: Turkle is a psychoanalyst by training and her instinct is to describe unfamiliar social habits as pathologies. She tends to revel in the more neurotic cases among her subjects and to gloss over happier experiences of technology, although she rarely lets clinical jargon infect her prose. The focus on psychology also neglects wider social and economic forces. Western civilisation was probably on a trajectory of atomisation, loneliness and narcissism before the invention of the internet. But that does not invalidate the diagnosis. The robotic moment is not a point in history but a threshold in ethics. It is the decision we make to put our faith in technology as the antidote to human frailty, when acceptance of frailty is what makes us human.

_____ Graduate
Student

Sample Reviewer Comment 3: While *Alone Together* does serve as a contrast to unwaveringly positive scholarship, it is not a work that despises technology, nor is it one which rejects newer forms of rhetoric created in its wake. Rather, the negative perspective presented is purposeful, and is designed to force us to ask important questions about what we are leaving behind in our quest for constant connectedness.

_____ Journalist

Sample Reviewer Comment 4: While the book is unapologetically nostalgic, the author does not wish to retreat from technology in order to go back to a "simpler time." Instead, she offers a profound meditation on technology's role in shaping our humanity.

_____ Graduate
Student

Sample Reviewer Comment 5: It's always fun to mock the stilted language of teenagers and lament the decline of letter writing. But these obvious objections shouldn't obscure the real mystery: If the Internet is such an alienating force, then why can't we escape it? If Facebook is so insufferable, then why do hundreds of millions of people check their page every day? Why did I just text my wife instead of calling her? I certainly don't expect Turkle to have all the answers, but her ethnographic portraits would have benefited from a more probing investigation of such questions.

_____ Assistant
Professor

Sample Reviewer Comment 6: While Turkle does provide simple suggestions for ways to change our relationships with technology, the aim of the book is not to provide a comprehensive solution to our dependency on technology. Turkle sets out to describe the phenomenon of digital dependency, especially among digital natives, and its effects on our personal relationships. ...Despite the limited sample of interviewees, *Alone Together* is a work that provokes a critical inward glance at our use of technology and our ability to maintain genuine human connections.

_____ Graduate
Student

Sample Reviewer Comment 7: Turkle and her interviewees sometimes seem to treat minor variations on human nature like threatening psychological revolutions. For example, Turkle and many of her subjects worry that people might interact with nonhuman simulacra, like robots, as if they were people, and might lose themselves in imaginary worlds like *Second Life*.

_____ Journalist

Answers with Commentary

Sample Reviewer Comment 1:

ANSWER: Assistant Professor

FULL CITATION: Dillon, Peggy M., "Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other – Review," *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly* 88, no. 4 (2012): 851-853.

COMMENTARY: This review takes a far more emphatic tone than a graduate student should ever adopt in a review for publication. However, it also commits a fatal (though too common) book review flaw: it criticizes Turkle's book for something it fails to do rather than assessing the quality of the book on the terms that the book itself sets out. Though Turkle is a psychologist, her expertise and interests do not lie in physiology, and neither she nor her book deserve to be criticized for not covering them. Also worth noting here is the review author's use of the first person. Though using first person is a matter of personal preference in most reviews, it is generally advisable to use third person when offering negative commentary, as the effect is less personal. Similarly, focusing on the book, rather than its author, can help negative commentary from sounding like an attack.

Sample Reviewer Comment 2:

ANSWER: Journalist

FULL CITATION: Behr, Rafael, "Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other by Sherry Turkle – Review," *The Observer*, January 29, 2011.

COMMENTARY: There are two main giveaways that this is a review by a journalist rather than an academic. First, Behr reveals the audience to whom his review is addressed when he notes that Turkle "rarely lets clinical jargon infect her prose." Since it would be a general audience rather than a specialized academic one who would care about the amount of jargon in a book, such commentary is more appropriate in a popular press review. Second, Behr's use of the verb "infect" as well as the lofty language that animates his final sentences reveals the bias of journalists against jargon and for universalizing (if not borderline clichéd) statements such as, "the acceptance of frailty is what makes us human."

Sample Reviewer Comment 3:

ANSWER: Graduate Student

FULL CITATION: Hinchey, Bradford, "Losing the Heart: Sherry Turkle's Alone Together," *Enculturation* (October 10, 2012), <http://enculturation.net/losing-the-heart>.

COMMENTARY: The rhetoric in this review excerpt is hardly critical. Though it adopts a classic "while" structure, the negative commentary is actually on other scholarship. In other words, the "while" is used as a precursor to praising Turkle. Therefore, while Hinchey does a nice job of assessing Turkle according to her articulated purpose, as well as maintaining a respectful (and overall positive tone) while doing so, he might have taken this final paragraph as an opportunity to offer something other than positive commentary on the book as a whole.

Sample Reviewer Comment 4:

ANSWER: Graduate Student

FULL CITATION: Layne, Alex, "A Review of: Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other, by Sherry Turkle," *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* 41, no. 4 (2011): 390-393.

COMMENTARY: Also adopting the classic "while" structure, this graduate student commentary mimics that of sample reviewer 3 in its overall positive tone and assessment. However, Layne does offer a slight critique of the book as "unapologetically nostalgic." Substantively, the reviewer does not really explain why such nostalgia is necessarily bad. Nonetheless, this critique is rhetorically smart because it (1) uses an adverb (unapologetically) that does not necessarily carry a negative denotation and (2) takes the book as its subject (before switching to positive assessments that focus on Turkle as its author).



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Sample Reviewer Comment 5:

ANSWER: Journalist

FULL CITATION: Lehrer, Jonah, "We, Robots," *The New York Times Book Review*, January 21, 2011.

COMMENTARY: Lehrer's jokey tone would never be appropriate for an academic review. More centrally, his entire series of questions are far outside the realm of what Turkle aims to examine. Moreover, his suggestion that Turkle might have benefited from seeking answers to such questions within her data seems downright naïve. An expert reviewer would understand that however interesting such questions are, the scope of Turkle's study and data could not have provided answers to them.

Sample Reviewer Comment 6:

ANSWER: Graduate Student

FULL CITATION: Garcia, Patricia. "Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other by Sherry Turkle, *InterActions: UCLA Journal of Education and Information Studies*, 8, no 1 (2012), <http://escholarship.org/uc/item/35k2p4b6>.

COMMENTARY: Of the review excerpts, this one comes closest to modeling both the tone and content of what a smart graduate student book review might contain. In terms of its content, it provides a substantive negative assessment of the limited sample of Turkle's interviewees (though the reviewer might have said more about what, specifically, was limited about them). This is a fair critique, and its force gets appropriately masked by the structure and rhetoric surrounding it. That is, the reviewer maintains a positive tone by surrounding her negative assessment with praise ("sandwiching" her critique). Moreover, in sentences or clauses that contain negative assessments, the reviewer takes the book (rather than Turkle) as her subject. Finally, she waits until she has nothing left but positive things to say before adopting the personal pronoun "our."

Sample Reviewer Comment 7:

ANSWER: Full Professor

FULL CITATION: Gopnik, Allison. "Diagnosing the Digital Revolution," *Slate*, February 7, 2011, http://www.slate.com/articles/books/2011/02/diagnosing_the_digital_revolution.html.

COMMENTARY: As a full professor, Gopnik adopts a tone that is probably stronger than one a graduate student might take (particularly when reviewing a book by a full professor). Gopnik inflects this critique with a subtle dig by grouping Turkle together with her interviewees, a pointed criticism given that Turkle's interviewees are teenagers and Turkle, like Gopnik, is a trained psychologist. Nonetheless, the negative critique she offers is a fair one in that it critiques the hyperbolic logic of certain portions of the book in a fair way. Moreover, she provides specific examples to back up her critique, rather than relying on a nebulous generalization.

