

# Writing a Review

Unless you have received special instructions, you should assume that you are not only **summarizing** the target work but critically **evaluating** it.

## 1. General Guidelines

Book reports usually attempt most of the following:

- Describe or **summarize** the contents of the book;
- Describe and evaluate its **method** or approach;
- Support your evaluation with judicious references and quotations;
- Evaluate the target work's contribution to the field;
- Maintain an objective point of view.

Keeping a clear idea of the function of the book report is important. The writer of a book report tries to demonstrate a clear understanding of the target work (this is often the chief educational goal of a report) as well as the ability to express a judgement logically and clearly. As always, the **audience** and **tone** of your report are crucial considerations.

## 2. Audience

Assume that the audience of your critique is someone who has not read the book in question but is interested in its subject matter and has a basic understanding of its field. The report should allow such a person to reach an independent judgement of the value of the work while providing an informed assessment (yours!) of it. Thus, you must present not only a judgement but the *grounds* for that judgement.

## 3. Process

### RESEARCH:

- Read other works on the same topic as your target text.
- Study your target text carefully *before* you begin to analyse it; determine the thesis of the book, its range, and its intended audience (the book's preface and introduction are especially important to this step).

### ASSESSMENT:

- Provide a broad summary of the book's content.

- Describe the author's approach: the type of evidence presented, the theoretical background, the conduct of the argument.
- Stating your criteria clearly, evaluate the writer's success in accomplishing his or her goal.
- Indicate any shortcomings or inadequacies -- what is missing or incomplete.
- Compare the book to others in its area, assessing its success or special contribution in comparison with other works attempting the same task.
- Review your argument to eliminate bias and ensure that you have provided sufficient evidence to support your judgements.

#### 4. Tone and Style:

As always, be clear, concise, and correct. Pay special attention to transitions between ideas; book reports are normally very compressed, and the omission of even a small connective phrase can make them unintelligible. Avoid expressing judgements in extreme terms: Such comments are rarely persuasive. They suggest carelessness or bias on the part of the reviewer rather than incompetence on the part of the original writer.

#### IMMODERATE:

**Robert Scholes should *never* be consulted on questions where objectivity is demanded; his own biases overwhelm his writing, turning every comment and every summary of research into a diatribe.**

#### BALANCED:

**Scholes's commitment to a Marxist social critique is reflected in his major judgements.**