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.