Guide for Critical Book Review

♦♦ Also to be used for chapter reviews ♦♦

I. Bibliographical Entry


II. Biographical Sketch of Author

This section should be no longer than a few sentences. The purpose of this section of the review is to demonstrate the author’s (translator’s or editor’s) competency (or inadequacy) in accomplishing his/her task.

III. Summary of Contents

♦♦ For a chapter review—two pages double spaced, minimum—For a book review—four pages minimum ♦♦

Your purpose here is to focus on the contents of the book. Give the reader of your review a thorough introduction to “what the book is about.” A good rule to follow: Try to make the first sentence of your summary as comprehensive and exhaustive as possible. In other words, summarize the book in once sentence. The remainder of your summary should be an elaboration of the “comprehensive sentence.”

One common weakness in this section is that students summarize the first half of the book, begin to run out of space, and then slight the latter half of the book. Do not do this! Carefully and logically organize your summary. Be sure you have a balanced summary focusing on all major points of interest.

Another common weakness in the “summary of contents” section is bogging down in minute details. Your aim is to introduce the reader to the forest, not to each individual tree.

IV. Critical Evaluation

♦♦ For a chapter review—three pages double spaced, minimum—For a book review—six pages minimum ♦♦

This is by far the most important section of the book review. A “critical book review” is not merely a summary of the book’s contents; it is a critical evaluation of how the author handled the contents.

Here one is to react to the book positively and negatively. Because all books, like people, are different, one can never impose a predetermined set of critical questions on the book. Some examples of questions that often are used to evaluate a book may be “What was the author’s purpose?” “Was it achieved?” “Why/Why not?” “What was unique about the book?” “Are there any unusual historical, theological, or literary traits?” “What biases (theological, philosophical, and/or denominational) may be evident?” “Of what benefit is this book?” “Who ought to read it?” (Please avoid the cliché, “Every sincere Christian ought to read this book.”) “Is the argumentation tight?” “Is the author’s thesis supported?” “What can the book and author teach us?”

Before writing a critical book review, read some critical reviews in professional journals. Remember that a critical review is written for people who have never read the book. So take nothing for granted. Do not assume that your reader knows anything about the book’s contents, the author’s point of view, or the author. Imagine that you are the only person who has read the book; your job is to explain it and to critique/evaluate it for everyone else.

Be specific in your criticisms. Avoid general statements that tell one nothing. Example: one student, in reviewing Roland Bainton’s classic biography of Martin Luther, wrote, “Bainton defended Luther’s action against the Roman Catholic Church.” If Bainton, in fact, did that, it is an important observation. But how did he? Be specific. Illustrate with particular details.

As with all formal papers, a critical book review should be well-written. The following are a few stylistic suggestions for you to keep in mind: (1) Avoid first person in formal writing. This is, to write without “I” or “we” or “my” or “mine.” (2) Avoid contractions in formal writing. Again, this is no serious offense, but you should be conscious of informal usage. (3) Avoid colloquial or trite expressions. Example: “The author begins by saying…”, “The author says first of all…” or “Every doctoral student should read this book.” (4) Use a dictionary. Spelling errors are without excuse and indicate sloppy work. Proof and re-proof your paper. Read your paper backwards for spelling or typing errors. (5) Vary style of writing. Good writing has a certain rhythm and style. (6) Avoid verbosity. (7) Organize your paper so as to avoid repetition. The “As I said previously…” sentence does not have to be written if you organize your materials before you begin writing.

Developed by Dr. Karen Bullock. Used by permission.

♦♦ Additions by Dr. C. Holmes