

How To Write A Book Review

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Often times, under-grad and graduate students are either bidden to write a book review or have a desire to do so. The nature of a book review is that it is a critical assessment of the numerous aspects of a particular text (perhaps, even, in a particular context). In this article/post, I want to offer some tips on how to write a book review. Keep in mind, as you read that some of the tips offered here might be more “common-sense” or discernable than others. Enjoy.

Before I get to the actual writing of the review, I want to offer a few thoughts on how to prepare. Firstly, when you're reading, be sure to have a writing utensil, a highlighter and if possible, page marking tabs. Secondly, as you begin to read, make sure you read the preface and introduction! This sets the book (usually, anyway) in context. Thirdly, be ready to critically engage the book; don't be afraid to mark, highlight and write in the book. Fourthly, develop a set of markings that you can use repeatedly as you read the text. For example, when I'm engaging a book, I use four symbols: an “X” is placed next to something I disagree with, a “?” is set by something I either am doubtful of or don't understand, a “check mark” is situated by something I agree with and a “circle” is drawn around a typo. I use a highlighter to mark words, phrases, sentences or paragraphs that stick out to me. Often times, I will write sentences next to my markings to remind me what thoughts or questions I had. I use page tab markers when I have a lot of markings on a particular page. Fifthly, at the end of each section / chapter, go back and review your markings and make a list of your thoughts, questions, etc. Or, if there was a particular quote or thought you liked, write the page number here for memory and reference. At the end of the chapter, engage the chapter by writing 3 or 4 sentences and summary remarks. I promise, if you do this, it will save you hours when you go to write the actual review!!! With concluding remarks at the end of each chapter, you'll only have to refer to 10-15 pages rather than the entire book. Now, on to the review itself!

To begin, I want to offer a kind of general, skeleton / outline for a review. The rest of this paper will proceed to explain each part of the outline.

1. Bibliographic Content
2. Introductory Remarks
 - a. State the thesis of the work
 - b. State the contribution that this work aims to make in its field

3. Critical Engagement

- a. State the audience to whom the book is aimed
- b. Engage the successes of this book
- c. Engage the shortcomings of this book
- d. State whether or not the thesis was fulfilled and the contribution made

4. Closing Remarks

- a. State whether or not you would recommend the book and why / why not
- b. State whether this will be a contribution / liability for its perceived readers

1. When writing a book review, you should begin by including the information of the book in the following format at the top of the article:

Author's Last Name, First Name, Initial. *Title* (italicized), edition (if necessary). Book Series (if necessary). City of Publishing House, State Abbr: Name of Publishing House, Year of Publication. # of Pages. Cost of Book.

Here's an example:

Anderson, Janice Capel. *Mark & Method: New Approaches in Biblical Studies*, 2nd ed. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2008. Pp. 288. \$19.95.

2. In the beginning of the review proper, you want to share with your readers the thesis / theses of the book. This will help readers determine whether or not the book is relevant to them. Sometimes, this may be the only thing readers need when they're making a decision on whether or not to purchase the literature. At this point, you might also attempt to say a bit about the contribution that this book is attempting to make in its respective field. For instance, you could state the thesis of a work and leave it at that or, if you know the context of the field, you could remark on whether or not this book is making a new contribution, rehashing an old argument, saying something that's already been said, etc. Here's an example of an opening paragraph of my review of the book, *Mark & Method*, mentioned above:

Honestly, I cannot sing enough praises for the second edition of *Mark & Method*. Edited by Janice Capel Anderson and Stephen D. Moore, this work is first rate. A compilation of scholarly essays, this tome makes an excellent textbook for students of Mark's Gospel. In fact, I would

recommend this book before any others when it comes to getting a firm, introductory grasp on Mark.

3. At this stage in the review, you will critically engage the text. This means that you will affirm it, argue with it, reject it, ask questions of it, etc. at various points. You will talk about the book's perceived audience, successes and shortcomings. You will also state whether or not the thesis was fulfilled and a contribution made. Don't be afraid to ask questions of the text and critique it. By the same token, give praise when it is due. Here is another excerpt from the previously mentioned book:

Imbued with a lengthy list of impressive contributors, this work contains 8 chapters that plummet the depths of hermeneutical issues, perspectives and approaches to the Gospel According to Mark. After a nice, concise history of the interpretation of Mk. in the first chapter, the next seven chapters illustrate the ways in which various hermeneutical methods illumine the text in various ways. The chapters' titles are: Narrative Criticism, Reader-Response Criticism, Deconstructive Criticism, Feminist Criticism, Social Criticism, Cultural Studies and Postcolonial Criticism.

I found chapters 2 (Elizabeth Struthers Malbon), 5 (Janice Capel Anderson), 6 (David Rhoads) and 7 (Abraham Smith) most illuminating. Then again, I am biased as my interests reside in socio-literary approaches towards the Scriptures. Given the way the book is structured—an individual, un-thematic, essay format—it is difficult, in a short amount of space, to offer any detailed analysis.

In literary publications, the lengths of reviews vary. In most small journals, reviews range from 400-650 words. In larger journals, such as RBL, reviews are typically 5-7 pages in length. (The sample review posted here is formatted for a small journal or an online post, such as on Pisteuomen.)

4. The last thing you want to do in the book review is make some sort of summation and offer some concluding thoughts and remarks. At this juncture you will state whether or not the book has achieved its stated end. If it has or has not, will probably play a large role in your recommending it, or not. Here, you should also state who you will suggest the book to, if anyone. You will also note whether or not you think the book is a liability or contribution to its field. (A good rule of thumb, I try to remember: Before you're too harsh, remember that someone probably put a lot of hours into this book. There's usually something noteworthy about the work, even if you disagreed with everything it said.) Here's yet another sample of the end of my brief book review:

This work makes not only a good introduction to Mk. but also a fine introduction to hermeneutical issues and methods. If you are a professor, I highly recommend using this book. If

you are a student, especially in Markan studies, you must own this. And if you are an avid reader or someone with an affinity for Mark's Gospel, it would be a travesty not to have this book on your shelf. Thanks to Fortress Press for sending me this outstanding work on the Gospel According to Mark!

In the end, some things that will help you complete a good book review are: knowledge of the field, some expertise in the field, educated wordplay, using language and imagery similar to that which the book itself uses, critical interaction with and engagement of the book, good spelling, a tight format / outline, etc. I'm sure that more could be said on this issue but I will stop here. If I can be of any assistance to you in your review writing endeavors, contact me by leaving a comment on any of the posts at the Pistuomen website found at: www.michaelhalcomb.blogspot.com.

Hope this helps! If so, why not drop me a line and let me know.

Blessings,
-TMWH