

WRITING CRITICAL BOOK REVIEWS

A critical review is not merely a summary of the book's contents (though that may be included) but primarily an **evaluation** of its strengths and weaknesses. Nor does "**critical**" mean bad-mouthing the book; it means you must decide what is good and bad about the book and why. You may wish to ask some or all of the following questions about the book as you read:

1. **Thesis.** What is the author's main argument? Is the thesis readily apparent? Is it convincing? (There may be sub-theses as well.)
2. **Scope.** What is covered, and do you wish there were more or less? What? Why?
3. **Organization.** Is the book logically constructed, or is it confusing, repetitive, etc.? How else could it have been written?
4. **Objectivity.** Does the author have a bias, and how does that affect the book? (It may actually help it.) If the author has a viewpoint, does he or she provide enough information so that one can form one's own judgments of the evidence?
5. **Style.** Is the level appropriate? Is the book easy to read, or did it frustrate you? Why?
6. **Sources.** Even without expertise you can quickly tell whether a book depends on such primary materials as documents, diaries, and letters, or whether it is all drawn from second-hand general texts. Judge accordingly.
7. **Documentation.** Any time you quote, give unusual information, or argue controversial points, you should cite the source in a way that is designed to lead the reader easily to that source. Does the author do this properly? (Incidentally, you should do it in your review.)
8. **Conclusions.** What are the general points which emerge from the book (these are some-times different from the thesis argued), and are they acceptable or useful?
9. **General value.** How useful might the book be to a specialist in this field, or to a student investigating the subject matter for the first time? (What an expert finds useful might be far too complex for the novice reader.)

If your topic gives no directions about how to organize the review, you might begin by listing what you see as the book's most important strengths and weaknesses, then construct your thesis accordingly; for example, "Although Mary Smith's *The Lost Continent* is clearly organized and thorough, its arguments about colonization are ultimately unconvincing." Such a thesis would help guide the structure of your essay: first analyze Smith's organization and thoroughness, and then discuss the weakness of her arguments. Try this approach as a starting point.