

How to Write a Critical Review of an Anthropological Text

Read Critical Reviews

Search [Academic Search Premier](#) for "anthropology book review" (without quotes), with Full Text and Scholarly (Peer Reviewed) Journals selected (checked). Read how other scholarly reviews have been written. Notice that critical reviews are not book reports. A critical review briefly describes the content of the book and more importantly, provides in-depth analysis and evaluation of its ideas and purpose. The descriptive element of a review should give the reader an understanding of the author's arguments, while the evaluative element should detail your assessment of the book's ideas.

Developing an Assessment: Before you Write

There is no definitive method to writing a review, although some critical thinking about the work at hand is necessary before you actually begin writing. Thus, writing a review is a two-step process: developing an argument about the work under consideration, and making that argument as you write an organized and well-supported draft.

What follows is a series of questions to focus your thinking as you dig into the work at hand. While the questions specifically consider books, you can easily transpose them to an analysis of performances, exhibitions, and other subjects. Don't feel obligated to address each of the questions; some will be more relevant than others to the book in question.

- What is the thesis—or main argument—of the book? If the author wanted you to get one idea from the book, what would it be? How does it compare or contrast to the world you know? What has the book accomplished?
- What exactly is the subject or topic of the book? Does the author cover the subject adequately? Does the author cover all aspects of the subject in a balanced fashion? What is the approach to the subject (topical, analytical, chronological, descriptive)?
- How does the author support her argument? What evidence does she use to prove her point? Do you find that evidence convincing? Why or why not? Does any of the author's information (or conclusions) conflict with other books you've read, courses you've taken or just previous assumptions you had of the subject?
- How does the author structure her argument? What are the parts that make up the whole? Does the argument make sense? Does it persuade you? Why or why not?
- How has this book helped you understand the subject? Would you recommend the book to your reader? Beyond the internal workings of the book, you may also consider some information about the author and the circumstances of the text's production:
- Who is the author? Nationality, political persuasion, training, intellectual interests, personal history, and historical context may provide crucial details about how a work takes shape. Does it matter, for example, that the biographer was the subject's best friend? What difference would it make if the author participated in the events she writes about?
- What is the book's genre? Out of what field does it emerge? Does it conform to or depart from the conventions of its genre? These questions can provide a historical or literary standard on which to base your evaluations. If you are reviewing the first book ever written on the subject, it will be important for your readers to know. Keep in mind, though, that naming "firsts"—alongside naming "bests" and "onlys"—can be a risky business unless you're absolutely certain.

Writing the Critical Review

Once you have made your observations and assessments of the work under review, carefully survey your notes and attempt to unify your impressions into a statement that will describe the purpose or thesis of your review. Then, outline the arguments that support your thesis.

Your arguments should develop the thesis in a logical manner. That logic, unlike more standard academic writing, may initially emphasize the author's argument while you develop your own in the course of the review. The relative emphasis depends on the nature of the review: if readers may be more interested in the work itself, you may want to make the work and the author more prominent; if you want the review to be about your perspective and opinions, then you may structure the review to privilege your observations over (but never separate from) those of the work under review. What follows is just one of many ways to organize a review.

Introduction

Since most reviews are brief, many writers begin with a catchy quip or anecdote that succinctly delivers their argument. But you can introduce your review differently depending on the argument and audience. The Writing Center's handout on introductions can help you find an approach that works. In general, you should include:

- Identify the author's thesis and explain it in your own words. How clearly and in what context is it stated and, subsequently developed? To what extent and how effectively is this thesis proven? Use examples to amplify your responses. If arguments or perspectives were missing, why do you think this might be?
- What are the author's aims? How well have they been achieved especially with regard to the way the book is organized? Are these aims supported or justified? How closely does the organization follow the author's aims? Are there places/ sections/ sentences/ actions in the book that evoke a strong response from you? What are those words or sentences? What is your reaction?

Critique

Here are a number of questions that may be addressed as part of the critique. Do not answer them all, but questions one and two are essential to any book critique, so those must be included. Absolutely do not answer these questions one after the other. Do not have one paragraph that answers one, and then the next paragraph that answers the next, etc. The answers should be part of a carefully constructed essay, complete with topic sentences and transitions.

- How are the author's main points presented, explained, and supported? What assumptions lie behind these points? What would be the most effective way for you to compress and/or re-order the author's scheme of presentation and argument?
- Identify the assumptions made by the author in both the approach to and the writing of the book. For example, what prior knowledge does the author expect readers to possess? How effectively are those assumptions worked into the overall presentation? What assumptions do you think should not have been made? Why?
- What new insights do you have as a result of reading this book? Has your world view changed? If so, why? If not, why not?
- Does the author's presentation seem fair and accurate? Is the interpretation valid? Are you aware of a new way to understand history? What is it?

Summary

This should be brief, as analysis takes priority. In the course of making your assessment, you'll hopefully be backing up your assertions with concrete evidence from the book, so some summary will be dispersed throughout other parts of the review.

- What comments can you make about the over-all presentation of the subject of the book?
- What is your recommendation: do you think others would enjoy reading the book? What type of audience would you recommend this book to? Over-all, what did you gain by reading this book? What do you think that others who read the book will gain? If you have a negative opinion of the book, tell why you think others would not enjoy reading the book.

(Adapted from <file:///Users/dwhume/Desktop/book%20reviews/review.html> and <http://www.udel.edu/anthro/budani/How%20to%20write%20a%20book%20review.pdf>)