

Writing Book Reviews in Political Science

This handout suggests ways to think about and organize your book review. However, before following this format, please consult the specific directions given to you by your instructor.

Goal of a book review:

To display substantial knowledge of the book's content, strengths, and weaknesses, as well as the ability to think critically about an academic argument.

Content of a book review:

A book review should answer three questions:

- 1.) What is the writer of the book trying to communicate?
- 2.) How clearly and convincingly did the author get his/her message across to the reader?
- 3.) Was the message worth reading?

Argument of a book review:

Like all political science papers, book reviews assert a claim -- they do more than summarize what the author says. The thesis of your book review will respond to questions 2 and 3 above: Is the argument of the book compelling? Did the author convince you of his point, and how significant is this point?

In considering your thesis, and in presenting your argument, you will need criteria for judging the book. Here are some suggestions of criteria to think about while reading the book and while formulating your argument:

- How important is the subject to the study of politics and government?
- How complete and thorough is the author's coverage of the subject?
- Does the author include sufficient evidence or neglect necessary evidence?
- How carefully is the author's analysis conducted?
- What are the strengths and limitations of the author's methodology?
- What is the quality of the writing? Is it clear, precise, and interesting?
- How does this book compare with others on the subject?
- What contribution does this book make to political science?
- Who will enjoy or benefit from this book?

Organization of a book review:

- *Introduction.* In this paragraph you should briefly introduce the work under discussion and state your thesis.
- *Summary.* Following your introduction, you should **concisely** restate the central claims of the author. In this section, be particularly sure to remain faithful to the ideas of the author as he or she states them. At the same time, aim for the essence of the book: What is the author's main point? What are the significant subpoints? Make sure that your summary is short and to the point.
- *Body of the paper.* The largest portion of your review should be devoted to elaborating and expanding on your thesis. In this section, you will move step-by-step through the criteria you have selected to assess the book; for each criterion, you will show how the author's effort holds up.

- ♦ *Conclusion.* Wrap up your paper with a statement about the significance of the book. This statement may concern the extent of its contribution to the discipline of political science or explain how it changed your understanding of a certain phenomenon.
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