Writing Book Reviews


Though written specifically for students in history courses, this guide is applicable to book reviews in most disciplines. Your instructor, however, may have a different guide to offer you or to recommend. Ask.

A book review is not usually a summary. Unless your instructor asks you to summarize a book’s contents, devote most of your review to analyzing its contents. Determine its theme; then describe how the theme is presented and how well it is defended. Were you persuaded by the author’s arguments? If it is part of the assignment, compare the book to other course materials. Be sure that your review makes it clear that you read and understood the book—or article, document, excerpt, or essay—and always provide the kind of analysis asked of you.

The following is an example of a book review of *Libraries through the Ages* by Fred Lerner (Continuum, 1999).

**Sample Book Review**

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Book Review of
Fred Lerner,
*Libraries through the Ages* (Continuum, 1999)

The thesis of this history of libraries around the world over the last 2,000 years is that libraries now have a greater impact on society than ever before and that the advent of the computer age is not likely to reverse that development. In the view of the author, libraries’ current roles of preserving and dispensing information and of guiding users to what they need will sustain the modern public library in the information age. The author, Fred Lerner, holds degrees in history and in library science and is also the author of *The Story of Libraries*.

In tracing the development of the modern library, the author gives a clear and concise history of the collecting and use of books that followed the invention of writing by the Sumerians some 5,000 years ago. He begins with the earliest writing—characters that were pressed into clay tablets that later hardened. He then describes Egyptian papyrus rolls (rolls of paper made from the stems of papyrus plants) that were stored
in jars and Jewish holy books that were written on animal skins.

The first true library was in the Greek colony of Alexandria (in Egypt). Here, possibly for the first time, the effort was made to bring together large numbers of manuscripts, organize them by subject, and make them available to scholars. Service to an elite of rulers, administrators, and scholars remained the role of the library until the nineteenth century. themselves as places where access to all kinds of information and knowledge was provided.

Because this new service role for libraries was well established before the age of digital technology, Lerner feels that libraries will not become museums of old knowledge. Instead, their reference and service function will expand to include access to digital information. Just as we once needed the assistance of reference librarians to find everything from the meaning of a word to the location of a book, now we need them to guide us through the maze of resources available via the Internet.

Reviews can vary widely in content to accommodate the different kinds of work they discuss. Still, a good review, like this one, includes specific elements. The book under review is identified at the very beginning. Then the author's thesis (about the growing impact of libraries on society) is made clear, and the overall scope of the work (the 2,000-year development of the public role of the library) is described. The author's qualifications are also mentioned in the introduction. The review then describes the stages in the development of writing, books, and libraries and the many cultures that have contributed to the process. All of these historical developments are part of the author's evidence for his thesis. The student reviewer does not assess the quality of the evidence, indicating that she has not become familiar enough with the subject to compare this work with others. If the course for which she wrote the review included other information on the history of libraries or on their impact on society, she probably would be expected to make such a comparison. For this same reason, the student closes with a summary of the book's conclusions rather than with her own assessment.

If your instructor asks for a particular kind of review, you should follow those directions. You might be asked to include some of the evi-
vidence that argues against the theme and to assess the author’s ability to present that evidence fairly and respond to it effectively. Or you might be asked to comment on the author’s personal or academic background and reasons for writing the book. This last point should certainly be included if there is significant debate among historians about the thesis of the book or if the book’s preface or introduction refers to such disagreements. With a book of this kind, your instructor may ask you to comment on the debate and perhaps also ask you how the book affects your views on the subject.

It is usually unwise to emphasize your personal opinion in a review unless your instructor asks you to do so. If you are asked to express it, don’t write simply, “I liked the way the author defended women’s rights.” Instead say, “I was impressed by the author’s use of many concrete examples of actions by women to dramatize their demand for the right to vote. The fact that one day they chained themselves to the White House fence made clear how strongly they felt about their cause.” Show that your opinion is the result of serious thought about the arguments made in the book.

If your assignment is a review that is longer than a few pages, you might want to quote a sentence or phrase from the book to support a point you are making. But don’t use too many quotations; fill your review with your own words rather than the author’s words.

The following guidelines summarize this advice.

**Guidelines for Writing a Book Review**

1. At the top of the first page, put the name of the author, the title of the work, the publisher’s name, and the date of publication.
2. State the author’s theme and thesis.
3. Describe the evidence presented to support the thesis.
4. If appropriate, describe the author’s background and reason for writing the book.
5. If possible, assess the arguments and evidence used. (Are they clear or unclear, strong or weak, convincing or unconvincing?)
6. If required, compare the work to related course materials. (Does it agree or disagree? Does it add a new perspective?)
7. If expected, close with your own assessment of the book’s assumptions, arguments, and conclusions.