



## Tennessee Valley Civil War Round Table General Guidance for Writing a Book Review



### 1. Writing Book Reviews

A book review tells not only what a book is about, but also how successfully the book explains itself. Professors often assign book reviews as practice in careful, analytical reading. As a reviewer, you bring together the two strands of accurate, analytical reading and strong, personal response when you indicate that the book is about and what it might mean to a reader (by explaining what it meant to you). In other words, reviewers answer not only the “what” but the “so what” question about a book. Thus, in writing a review, you combine the skills of *describing* what is on the page, *analyzing* how the book tried to achieve its purpose, and *expressing* your own reactions.

- a. Reading the Book: As you are reading or preparing to write the review, ask yourself these questions:
- b. What are the author’s viewpoint and purpose? Are they appropriate? The viewpoint or purpose may be implied rather than stated, but often a good place to look if or what the author says about his or her purpose and viewpoint is the introduction or preface.
- c. What are the author’s main points? Again, these will often be stated in the introduction.
- d. What kind of evidence does the author use to prove his or her points? Is the evidence convincing? Why or why not? Does the author support his or her points adequately?
- e. How does this book relate to other books on the same topic? Is the book unique? Does it add new information? What group of readers, if any, would find this book most useful?
- f. Does the author have the necessary expertise to write the book? What credentials or background does the author have that qualify him or her to write the book? Has the author written other books or papers on this topic? Do others in this field consider this author to be an expert?
- g. What are the most appropriate criteria by which to judge the book? How successful do you think the author was in carrying out the overall purposes of the book? Depending on your book’s purpose, you should select appropriate criteria by which to judge its success. Use any criteria your instructor has given you in lecture or on your assignment sheet. Otherwise, here are some criteria to consider. For example, if an author says his or her purpose is to argue for a particular solution to a public problem, then the review should judge whether the author has defined the problem, identified causes, planned points of attack, provided necessary background information, and offered specific solutions. A review should also indicate the author’s professional expertise. In other books, however, the authors may argue for their theory about a particular phenomenon. Reviews of these books should evaluate what kind of theory the book is arguing for, how much and what kind of evidence the author uses to support his or her scholarly claims, how valid the evidence seems, how expert the author is, and how much the book contributes to the knowledge of the field.

### 2. Writing the Book Review

Book reviews generally include the following kinds of information; keep in mind, though, that you may need to include other information to explain your assessment of a book. Most reviews start off with a *heading* that includes all the bibliographic information about the book. If your assignment sheet does not indicate which form you should use, you can use the following:

*Title.* Author. Place of publication: publisher, date of publication. Number of Pages.

Like most pieces of writing, the review itself usually begins with an *introduction* that lets your readers know what the review will say. The first paragraph usually includes the author and title again, so your readers don’t have to look up to find this information. You should also include a very



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brief overview of the contents of the book, the purpose or audience for the book, and your reaction and evaluation. You should then move into a section of *background information* that helps place the book in context and discusses criteria for judging the book. Next, you should give a *summary* of the main points of the book, quoting and paraphrasing key phrases from the author. Finally, you get to the heart of your review—*your evaluation* of the book. In this section, you might discuss some of the following issues:

- a. How well the book has achieved its goal?
- b. What possibilities are suggested by the book?
- c. What the book has left out?
- d. How the book compares to others on the subject?
- e. What specific points are not convincing?
- f. What personal experiences you've had related to the subject.

It is important to use labels to carefully distinguish your views from the author's, so that you don't confuse your reader. Then, like other essays, you can end with a *direct comment* on the book, and tie together issues raised in the review in a conclusion. There is, of course, no set formula, but a general rule of thumb is that the first one-half to two-thirds of the review should summarize the author's main ideas and at least one-third should evaluate the book.

### Example

Below is a review of *Taking Soaps Seriously* by Michael Intintoli, written by Ruth Rosen in the *Journal of Communication*. It has 351 words. Note that Rosen begins with a context for Intintoli's book, showing how it is different from other books about soap operas. She finds a strength in the kind of details that his methodology enables him to see. However, she disagrees with his choice of case study. All in all, Rosen finds Intintoli's book most useful for novices, but not one that advances our ability to critique soap operas very much.

*Taking Soaps Seriously: The World of Guiding Light*. Michael Intintoli. New York: Praeger, 1984. 248 pp.

Ever since the U.S. public began listening to radio soaps in the 1930s, cultural critics have explored the content, form, and popularity of daytime serials. Today, media critics take a variety of approaches. Some explore audience response and find that, depending on sex, race, or even nationality, people "decode" the same story in different ways. Others regard soaps as a kind of subversive form of popular culture that supports women's deepest grievances. Still others view the soap as a "text" and attempt to "deconstruct" it, much as a literary critic dissects a work of literature. Michael Intintoli's project is somewhat different. For him, the soap is a cultural product mediated and created by corporate interests. It is the production of soaps, then, that is at the center of his *Taking Soaps Seriously*. To understand the creation of soap operas, Intintoli adopted an ethnographic methodology that required a rather long siege on the set of "Guiding Light." Like a good anthropologist, he picked up a great deal about the concerns and problems that drive the production of a daily soap opera. For the novice there is much to be learned here . . . But the book stops short of where it should ideally begin. In many ways, "Guiding Light" was simply the wrong soap to study. First broadcast in 1937, "Guiding Light" is the oldest soap opera in the United States owned and produced by Procter and Gamble, which sells it to CBS. It is therefore the perfect soap to study for a history of the changing daytime serial. But that is not Intintoli's project . . .

*Taking Soaps Seriously* is a good introduction to the production of the daily soap opera. It analyzes soap conventions, reveals the hierarchy of soap production, and describes a slice of the corporate production of mass culture. Regrettably, it reads like an unrevised dissertation and misses an



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important opportunity to probe the changing nature of soap production and the unarticulated ideological framework in which soaps are created.

### 3. Polishing the Book Review

After you've completed your review, be sure to proofread it carefully for errors and typos. Double-check your bibliographic heading—author, title, publisher—for accuracy and correct spelling as well.

There is no standard length for a TVCWRT book review but if you don't feel comfortable that you have communicated what you think is important in 500 to 1000 words, you're not going to like it any better at 2000 words. The old adage "I would have written a shorter letter if I had more time." Applies here. But, it is all up to you! Thanks! Arley

### 4. On Writing Book Reviews

A book review is a critical analysis of a secondary text, not a summary of the work's content. In a book review, you should evaluate the way in which the author handled the subject and the contribution of the book to your understanding of the issues discussed.

There are four basic categories to be considered in your evaluation--historiography, methodology, style, and personal evaluation.

- a. Historiography: the tradition in which the author writes history. Historiography (which is a fancy word for the "history of history writing") concerns the intellectual approach the author takes to the subject, the school of historical thought that most influences the author, and the assumptions, values, or analytical frameworks the author employs.
  - i. What is the author's theme or thesis? What is the author's purpose in writing the book?
  - ii. What are the author's values and biases? From what point of view does the author write?
  - iii. Are the author's assumptions and assertions in agreement with those generally held in the field? If not, are deviations clearly identified, well motivated, and overtly justified?
  - iv. What impact does this work have in its field? Does it contribute something original? Will it have lasting value?
- b. Methodology: the author's method includes the rules employed in organizing the evidence, the kinds of questions asked by the author, and the approach utilized in answering them.
  - i. What are the sources of the author's data? Are these sources adequate? What are the limitations of the data, any inherent biases or problems which must be taken into consideration in its use?
  - ii. What kinds of questions does the author ask about the subject? Are there questions which remain unasked, or questions asked but unanswered?
- c. Style: the author's style has to do with the writing and organization of the book.
  - i. Is the book well written? Are there passages of eloquence or elegance?
  - ii. Is the book well argued? Does the author clearly articulate and answer questions raised in the book? How well does the author's point come across and does it convince you?
  - iii. Is the book accessible to an intelligent reader or only to a specialist?
- d. Personal Evaluation: think about your own approach to the subject, your own values, and your preferred method. Reading is not a passive experience, but an interaction between author and reader.
  - i. What is your response to the author's point of view?
  - ii. What do you think to be the greatest strength of the work, and the greatest weakness?
  - iii. What does the book contribute to your understanding of the subject?



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The form of a book review is an essay. You should begin with an introduction that both grabs the reader's attention and provides a statement of the points you intend to make (a thesis statement). You may then choose to move on and write a paragraph about each of the categories (historiography, methodology, style, and personal evaluation). You may decide that the topic of your book review lends itself to a deeper examination of one category than the others, for example, if its methodology is especially interesting or terrible. Finally, you will want to provide a conclusion for your essay which sums up your argument.

- e. Remember: A book review is a short analysis of the book not a dissertation. The book review, hopefully, either encourages a member or Civil War enthusiast to buy the book, go to the library and check out the book- or forget-about-it.

### 5. Book Review Format

Here is the book review format you may follow for an historical novel:  
Steps to Follow When Writing a Book Review:

(Note: You do not have to answer every question; these are only suggestions to guide your writing.)

- a. Write at least 3-4 sentences about the plot
  - i. What was the story about?
  - ii. Who were the main characters?
  - iii. What did the main characters do in the story?
  - iv. Did the main characters run into any problems?
  - v. Did the main characters have any adventures?
  - vi. Who was your favorite character? Why?
- b. Your personal experiences
  - i. Could you relate to any of the characters in the story?
  - ii. Have you ever done some of the things or felt some of the same things that the characters did?
- c. Your opinion
  - i. Did you like the book?
  - ii. What was your favorite part of the book?
  - iii. Do you have a least favorite part of the book?
  - iv. If you could change something in the book, what would it be?
  - v. (If you wish you could change the ending, remember not to tell the ending to the story you read!)
- d. Your recommendation
  - i. Would you recommend this book to another person?
  - ii. What type of person would like this book?