How to Write a Book Review: A Guide for Students

HUGH B. HAMMETT

Sooner or later most students who take history courses will be required to write a critical book review. The assignment is especially popular with harassed instructors who have too many students to require full-scale term papers but who would feel guilty without asking their students for some kind of written exercise outside of class. Book reviews are not particularly popular with students, however, because the average person has very little idea how to proceed with such a project. The enterprising student cannot find much help in sources like the New York Times Book Review or the New York Review of Books since essays in these publications usually reveal far more about the reviewer than about the work under discussion. Nor should historians deceive themselves that journals like the American Historical Review or the Journal of American History offer more reliable guides. Unfortunately, most scholarly reviews are written solely for scholars (i.e., specialists), and all too frequently the only point that is made is that the reviewer knows more about the subject, or thinks he does, than the author of the volume under discussion.

Dr. Hugh B. Hammett received his degree from the University of Virginia. He is currently Associate Professor and Chairman of History and Political Science, College of Continuing Education, Rochester Institute of Technology, Rochester, New York.

The following suggestions are addressed directly to the student who wants to know how to go about reviewing a book. These suggestions assume that the review will be written for submission in class; but it would be well to observe that the good student will think through all of the following areas as he reads, even if no written assignment is involved.

1. Publication Information Should Be Complete. This information will be important if anyone later wants to procure a copy of the volume; also certain publishers specialize in books on particular subjects or with special political ideas. You should give the author's full name, the complete title of the book, and the place, publisher and
II. The Author's Background Is Important to a Thorough Analysis of Any Book. Would you pay attention to an unsigned letter? What difference is there in reviewing a book by an author of whom you know nothing? What if the author is a communist, teaching in an East German university? Or what if he is an Eastern European émigré to the United States and a virulent anti-communist? Would it be to your advantage in reading a book about race relations to know that the author is white and has spent his entire life in Mississippi? Would it be well to know that a scholar writing about United States-Canadian relations was born and educated in Canada? Or might a diplomatic historian trained in a Latin American university possibly have a different attitude toward the Monroe Doctrine than a professor educated in the United States? If a man has studied and written about the medieval frontier for all of his scholarly career, would you wisely be cautious if he suddenly published a monograph about internal politics in Vietnam?

To belabor the point no longer, historians are a part of their books; and their books are a part of them. A student approaches the task of critical evaluation with a huge "blind spot" if he knows nothing about the author of the volume. In some cases, of course, the author's background may be of no special significance; but at other times it could be disastrous for you not to know.

The reference librarian at your college library can make many helpful suggestions about finding biographical information. As a starting point, however, for non-American writers you can look at Who's Who (especially for important British historians), the International Who's Who, or the Dictionary of International Biography. American historians may be in Who's Who in America but more likely will be listed in the Directory of American Scholars, Volume I: History.

III. There Are Certain Things That Every Book Review Should Contain. Without this basic information your reader cannot tell whether the book would be valuable for his own use. What is the purpose of the book? Usually in the preface or the first chapter of a monograph (works on special topics in history are "monographs," not novels), the author justifies the need for his volume and how his book will meet that need. You should keep the stated purpose in mind as you read. If the author does not do what he said he would, then his book has failed one important test.

What is the scope of the book? What period of time does it cover? What kind of history does it include: political, economic, social, diplomatic, intellectual?

Are there major themes that are essential to understanding the book? Identify them. More important, is there a particular thesis (or original idea, a new contribution) that the author is trying to prove? You should determine whether or not the author offers evidence to support his thesis.

Are there basic flaws in the book? Point them out. Are there sections that are exceptionally well done? Comment on them.

Is the book especially relevant in the light of contemporary events? Does it make any overall contribution to our knowledge of history that characterizes the book as a distinguished volume?

IV. Sources Must Also Be Considered. No assessment of a book is complete without some comment on the scholarly evidence from which the author draws. Are there footnotes? Is there an extensive bibliography? Does the author use primary source material (documents, diaries, letters, newspapers, journals) or does he confine himself to secondary materials (books written by other authorities on the same subject)? Usually, more scholarly works will heavily employ original research in primary sources. "Popularized," "derivative," or "synthesis" works draw principally on the books of others.

V. Reviews Must Be Specific As Well As General. For every generalization that you make about the book, you should offer one or two specific examples clearly illustrating what you mean. If for no other reason, your specific illustrations will show your instructor that you have conscientiously read the book and that you have attained some mastery of basic factual material. Of course, any specific quotations or ideas that you lift from the book should be acknowledged with footnote or by identifying the appropriate pages in parentheses that follow the borrowed material.

One word of caution is necessary about the use of extensive quotations. Merely to string sections of quoted material throughout your paper does not make your work scholarly. Each quotation that you use should be clearly linked to the idea you are discussing. The quotation must be introduced by an appropriate comment that establishes its relationship to the subject at hand. Do not fall into the use of quotations out of laziness. Never borrow directly unless the quotation is so eloquent, witty, or precise that you could not possibly express the same idea in a better way yourself.

VI. Reviews Must Be Both Descriptive and Analytical. Would you believe that many reviews which are submitted might be written by the average bright student who has read only the table of contents and then perhaps thumbed through the volume? You should communicate a few of the author's significant ideas. Why are they important? What disagreements or reservations would you have? If a book is "good," why? If a book is "boring," why? (Oh yes, any book over one hundred pages is not automatically boring).

Above all, do not be afraid to give your own opinion.
Too often student papers are cop-outs—exercises in trying to say just as little as possible. Avoid the use of the passive voice:

“Jefferson was said to...” (Who said it? The author? You? Jefferson’s friends? His enemies?)

“It is believed...”

“England is shown...”

Also avoid weasel-words:

“The author appears to say...” (Does he say it or not?)

“The book seems to say...”

“It may or may not be true...”

Be direct about what the author says and about what you think. Clearly distinguish between your ideas and those of the author.

Your instructors are aware that you are not an authority on the material you are studying. But they also know that you are a bright, intelligent person and are capable of forming critical judgments. Do not be intimidated by an author. Be decisive and forceful—even if it is only to state your approval of what you have read. For the purposes of learning, most teachers believe that it is better for you to attempt a critical judgment that may turn out to be unfounded than to make no judgment at all.

If you would like to see what other authorities have said about a book, check the Reader’s Guide to Periodical Literature in the reference section at the library. It will direct you to journals where reviews have been published.

VII. Work Hard on Your Writing. Painful as it is to be so blunt, the writing in the majority of student papers runs from barely adequate to abominable. Too many papers are mechanically sloppy. You should understand that correct grammar, spelling, punctuation, choice of word, and syntax are not important merely because they are traditional or because English has “always been done that way.” They are important because they make your writing clear. They enable you to say exactly what you mean.

Without the ability to write clearly and correctly, you will be an intellectual cripple all your life. In spite of the onslaught by television, the printed word is still the most common means of communication among highly educated people. It does not matter how brilliant you may be or how noble your intentions. Without the ability to write forcefully and clearly, your gifts will be wasted. How far do you think Thomas Jefferson would have gotten had he written, “We hold these truths to be self-evident that all men is created equal...?”

A final suggestion may help. If you type your paper or have someone else do it (all instructors appreciate typed work, and many require it), be sure to proofread your copy before turning it in. Even after one typing, rewrite your paper if necessary. Teachers have considerable sympathy for those students who try but who have never learned to write well; but they have little patience and show little mercy in awarding grades for those who are too careless to use their dictionaries or are too lazy to read their own papers before submitting them.

Historians as a rule pride themselves on a fine sense of the language. Moreover, history is one of the few disciplines left that offers the average educated person a clear and readable body of knowledge unencumbered by jargon and complicated special vocabulary. Your papers will be most successful and your grades will invariably be higher if your writing is in this tradition.