

SAMPLE GUIDELINES FOR CRITICAL BOOK REVIEW

Preliminary Considerations

First, one must understand that a critical book review is not a book report (a summary of the contents of a book). A critical book review is a vehicle for examining and discussing issues the book itself raises or fails to raise. One writes a critical book review for the benefit of those who might not presently have time to read the book but who nevertheless need to learn more about its basic approach should they desire to read or study it at a future time. The job of the book reviewer is to inform these readers concerning any merits and/or shortcomings the book may have. From information based on a well-written review, the reader may conclude that this book is either indispensable or inconsequential.

Components of a Critical Book Review

- A. Give complete bibliographical information at the top of the page (title, author, publisher, place of publication, date of publication, number of pages, and name of reviewer).

Use the following format:

Toward Rediscovering the Old Testament, by Walter C. Kaiser, Jr. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1987. 250 pages. Reviewed by Randy C. Slocum.

- B. Briefly state the reason this book was chosen for review. State the author's credentials (education, place of employment, previous achievements, etc.) as a preface to giving the book a serious hearing. Biographical information about the author should be included only as it demonstrates the author's competency to write the book. Within the context of the paper, do not use titles (Dr., Rev., etc.). In most brief reviews, you will likely need to limit the introduction to one or two paragraphs.
- C. Briefly (in one or two well-written sentences) summarize the thesis of the book. This is a crucial step because the thesis contains the reason why the author produced this particular book (there may be dozens on the market with similar subject matter).
The thesis will state the author's basic presuppositions and approach. The critical nature of the book review will then grow from the reviewer's conclusion that the book does or does not achieve the author's stated purpose.
- D. The main body of a critical book review will be concerned with "thesis development." That is, did the author achieve the stated purpose? In this section the reviewer will inspect each of the chapters of the book to see how the thesis is (or is not) developed. If the author makes progress and develops the thesis convincingly, providing adequate information and statistical data, the reviewer says so, providing concrete examples and citing their page numbers in the text.

Given the limited amount of space in a brief book review, footnotes should not be utilized. Quotations or ideas taken directly from the text should be followed parenthetically by the page number of the quotation. The abbreviation for page(s) (p./pp.) should not be used.

Example:

Rainer argues that evangelistic churches should focus on reaching youth (20). Indeed, he writes, “Many churches fail to recognize that adolescence is a critical time of receptivity to the gospel” (21).

If the thesis is poorly developed or if the examples are inadequate to support the assertions of the author, the reviewer will point this out as well. Most critical book reviews will contain both praise and criticism, carefully weighed and balanced against one another.

Remember the purpose of a critical book review is not to provide a summary of the book. You may assume that the professor and the grader know the contents of the book.

Questions the reviewer will seek to answer in this section might include:

- Is there an adequate, consistent development of the author's stated thesis? Why or why not?
- What is the author's purpose, i.e., what does he/she hope to accomplish through this book? Does the author accomplish the purpose? If so, how does he/she do so? If not, why not?
- Does the author approach the subject with any biases, i.e., do the author's theological, experiential, philosophical, denominational, or cultural perspectives influence his/her conclusions?
- Does the author properly support his/her thesis? Does the author adequately consider and refute opposing viewpoints? Is the book limited in application to specific types of churches? Is the book relevant to contemporary culture?
- Does the author have to resort to suppression of contrary evidence in order to make the thesis credible (slanting)? If so, what additional evidence would weaken the case?
- Is the thesis sound but marred by a flawed procedure?
- Is the author's case proved, or would another thesis have been more appropriately chosen?

E. Finally, a summary section should be attached. How does this book differ from other treatments of the same subject matter? What is unique and valuable about this approach as opposed to the others? Would the reviewer recommend this book above others? Why or why not?

This final summary should include the major strengths and weaknesses of the book and evaluate its value for readers who may be interested in that particular field of inquiry. Your primary purpose in this section is to respond both positively and negatively to the book's contents and presentation. Needless to say, this response should be more in-depth than, “This book is a good book that should be recommended reading for everyone.” On the other hand,

“This book is a lousy book not worth reading” is also inadequate. Central to this is the basic question of whether or not the author has achieved the book's stated purpose.

Answer questions such as:

- What are the strengths of the book, i.e., what contributions does the book make?
- Why should a person read this book?
- What did you learn from this book?
- How might you apply the lessons of this book in your ministry context?
- Would you recommend the book to other ministers? to seminary students? to laypersons? Why, or why not?

Do not allow your response to this question to become lengthy (for this paper is not primarily an evaluation of your ministry), but do make some application.

Throughout your critique, be specific in your evaluations. Do not just tell the reader about the book; tell and show the reader with concrete examples from the book. As previously suggested, include page numbers when making specific reference to the book.

F. The length of the review should be between five and seven pages, double-spaced.

Style Issues for a Critical Book Review

Turabian's *A Manual for Writers of Term Papers, Theses, and Dissertations* (7th ed.) is the accepted standard for style issues.

The following guidelines are included to counter common style errors:

- A. Utilize this suggested outline to guide your book review, but do not include the specific subheadings (“Bibliographical Entry,” “Summary of the Book,” etc.) in the essay. The brevity of the review demands a smooth flow from one section to another without including the subheadings.
- B. Use first-person sparingly; however, you may use “I” when referring to your opinion of a text.
- C. Avoid contractions in formal writing.
- D. Use active voice as much as possible.
- E. Be clear and concise. A brief review allows no room for wandering from your objective.
- F. Use your spell-checker, but do not trust it. A spell-check will not catch the error in such sentences as, “The whole church voted too pass the amendment.” Use your eyes as well as your spell-checker.

G. Proofread your paper. Finish the paper, and proof it. Lay it aside, and proof it again at a later time. If you do not catch your errors, someone else will.