

Writing a book review: frequently asked questions answered

Introduction

This article provides some guidance on how to write a book review. Before reading this article note the following caveats. First, it needs to be emphasized that there is no right or wrong way to write a book review, nor are there any 'absolute' rules. Hence what is offered here is mere guidance and not a rigid, step-wise guide. Second, although mostly the same principles apply to academic and literary book reviews, this article focuses on writing academic reviews.

Finally, the authors have adopted a narrative style (frequently asked questions and their answers) rather than a 'dense' essay style, as this article is intended more for the novice book reviewer than the experienced. The questions selected are those that the authors themselves asked early in their book reviewing careers and those frequently raised by junior book reviewers.

Is there a specific writing style?

No. The only point worth noting is that scientific book reviews are more academic than journalistic in style and should be written as such. Keep your reader in mind while writing. Although there is no one preferred style or structure, when you are asked to review a book, it is a good idea to go through some book reviews published in that journal to familiarize yourself with their house style, if any.

Some book review editors would argue that through a book review the reader should hear the reviewer's individual and distinctive voice (Femi Oyeboade, personal communication, 2007). Any attempt to edit it to fit a pre-conceived style, they argue, is stunting creativity and literary development. That said, it is ultimately

up to the book reviews editor(s) to decide on the style of reviews to be published in their journal.

Doctors, as opposed to professional writers, do not usually have practice in writing essays and developing arguments in their training. Hence for doctors starting out as book reviewers, literary book reviews in publications such as the *Times Literary Supplement* or the *London Review of Books* are good starting points to learn how to write book reviews. The advice of George Orwell (1946) to keep it simple is important in this context. Orwell's essay *Politics and the English Language* gives some rules on writing good English. Some reviewers find clichés particularly annoying, such as starting a book review with 'This book ...'.

Does the length matter?

Perhaps the most appropriate answer to this question was given by the book reviews editors of the *British Journal of Psychiatry*, when they commented 'the quality of a (book) review seldom relates to its length' (Crown et al, 2000). That said, some but not all journals have a recommended word limit for book reviews. If so, stick to it. If time and space permit (both for the reviewer and the editor), a longer review gives the reviewer the opportunity to say more and allows the reader to be educated more.

What are the key steps in writing a book review?

Although there is no universal formula for writing book reviews, the authors have found the following steps useful:

In step one, skim the book – its title, index (often the best place to start), overall layout, illustrations, bibliography. Who is the author? Look up him/her on Google to assess his/her qualifications to write the book, any previous work, research interests and so on. Briefly scan the existing literature for papers and books on similar and related topics so that you can view the book in that wider context, and against any 'competition'.

The next step involves more careful reading of the book, making notes as you go along. Key questions to ask yourself include: Is the author sufficiently qualified to write this book? What are the key aims and objectives of this book and does it meet them? Is the title appropriate? What are the issues it explores and how well does it do this? Do ideas and chapters flow logically? Are there factual inaccuracies? Is the information presented up-to-date? What are the book's major strengths and limitations? Does it add anything to what is already known on the topic? Does it raise any wider issues? Are the conclusions justified? What have you learned? For books with previous editions, it is important to note what has changed since the last edition.

The next step is writing the first draft of your review. Adapt your style to suit the particular journal. Remember that a book review is a commentary and not a summary. So don't merely describe the contents in great detail, a review should be more about your views and reflections on the book. You could start by introducing the topic of the book and then moving on to answer questions raised in the previous paragraph in a logical manner. Viewing a book review as a literary creation, the authors make no recommendation for a specific format. Clearly state your views on the book including its style, what it adds, what it leaves out, what you learned, etc. You could use brief quotations from the book to illustrate your points.

Finally, re-read and spell check the first draft. Get your first few book reviews proofread by a senior colleague if feasible.

Should the reviewer read the book cover to cover?

In most cases, yes. Given the hard work that goes into writing a book, it would be disrespectful to the authors not to. But in rare instances, such as when reviewing textbooks, it may not be essential or practical to read the book cover to cover.

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What do readers expect from a book review?

It is the reader who stands to gain the most out of a book review – although the book’s author and publisher may too, from the publicity that a favourable review could bring. So, in that sense, the primary duty of the reviewer is to the reader. Very good book reviews ‘should inform, entertain and occasionally provoke’ the reader (Wessely, 2000). As a reader, this may be too much to expect of all or even most reviews. At the least, readers can expect sufficient information in a book review (conveyed in 500 words or so) to answer questions such as – Do I want to read this book? and Should I buy this book?

What does the book reviews editor expect from a book review?

A good review should be written in an accessible and readable form; a lively and original take on the subject is welcome but hard to achieve. It should tell the reader what the book is about rather than being used by the reviewer to trot out his/her pet theories. It is also important that the review does not assume specialized knowledge on behalf of the reader (Allan Beveridge, personal communication, 2007). The articles by Crown et al (2000) and Wessely (2000) give further insight into some book reviews editors’ opinions and preferences.

Can a book review be critical?

It could be but the reviewer should respect the author who has obviously gone to some trouble to write the book. However, if there are genuine shortcomings or factual inaccuracies in a book, they need to be highlighted. Well-written, thought-provoking reviews, although critical, can be intellectually stimulating and informing reads. Note that a book review is only one reviewer’s opinion of a book and that alone, however critical, does not necessarily make it a bad book.

Do I need to be an expert to review a book?

Of course, it helps, but it is not a must. It is left entirely to the discretion of the journal’s book reviews editor(s) to invite a reviewer for a particular book. They

might invite experts in the field to review some books. But as in reality there are more books to review than experts, and because experts’ time is more precious, more often than not non-experts are also asked to review books. It is also good to get the opinion of non-experts to see if the book communicates to others outside the field – and if it has any more widespread significance.

How can I become a book reviewer?

Some journals invite book reviewers from time to time. For example, there is now a book review section on the Royal College of Psychiatrists’ website (www.rcpsych.ac.uk) and invitations are now open to unsolicited book review submissions. But most journals do not have a formal policy for recruiting book reviewers. Those interested are best advised to contact the book reviews editor(s) with an expression of interest. If invited to review a book, remember that, apart from the quality of the review itself, punctuality (submission on time) is very important – try to establish a reputation as a reliable reviewer to ensure further invitations.

What books get reviewed?

The types of books that get reviewed vary from journal to journal, in accordance with a journal’s aims and scope, target readers and field of specialization. Often book review editors have an in-house policy that guides the selection of books. For example, a general psychiatric journal such as the *British Journal of Psychiatry* might select books that fall within the wide remit of neurosciences and humanities, whereas a more specialist journal such as *Addiction* might choose books in the field of addictive disorders. In practice, there could also be some overlap – with the same book

being reviewed in different journals. This happens because publishers often send their books to many journals simultaneously in the hope of getting them reviewed.

Are all book reviews solicited or commissioned?

Although this varies from journal to journal, most book reviews are commissioned. In other words, journal editors or book review editors select the books to be reviewed and then invite reviewers to review these books. This is to ensure consistency in the type of books that get reviewed in a particular journal – in line with journal policy. That said, some journals accept well-written, unsolicited book reviews.

Conclusions

It is hoped that these questions and answers have been helpful in clarifying some key aspects of book reviewing. In the authors’ opinion, there is no substitute for gaining hands-on experience, especially early on in one’s book reviewing career, and getting reviews looked at by experienced book reviewers or senior academic colleagues. Good luck. **BJHM**

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Conflict of interest: Dr Dharmadhikari is the assistant book reviews editor for the Quarterly Journal of Mental Health. The opinions expressed here are those of the author and not of the journal.

Crown S, Lee A, Ramsay R (2000) And now the book reviews... Items for discussion. *Br J Psychiatry* 177: 388

Orwell G (1946) *Politics and the English Language*. Horizon-GB, London

Wessely S (2000) And now the book reviews... A review of reviewing. *Br J Psychiatry* 177: 388–9

KEY POINTS

- Scientific book reviews should be written in a more academic than journalistic style and with the reader in mind.
- Although there is no universal formula for writing a book review some useful general steps are recommended.
- Good book reviews should inform, entertain and occasionally provoke the reader.
- A good book review should be written in an accessible and readable form, without assuming specialized knowledge on behalf of the reader.