

## WRITING A BOOK REVIEW

Often students are asked to write book reports or book reviews. A book report is a simple summary of a book. These reports are, in effect, short abstracts. It is useful to write a report because the writer engages the book seriously, and the report itself provides an enduring record that may serve as a later note for research. A book review, however, is more complicated and demanding. Reviewers report on the content and evaluate the book, discussing matters such as the author's logic, style, evidence, conclusions, and organization. The reviewer may also compare the book with others whose authors have treated the same material.

When you are assigned a book review, following the steps listed below may help you organize your review.

1. Scan the book to get a broad idea of its subject and theme. Then go back and read the book thoroughly.
2. When you begin writing the review, identify the work and the author. Give the name of the book and its subject; also identify the author of the book, not only giving his or her name but also providing some important information about him/her: is he or she affiliated with a university? what is his/her area of expertise? has he/she written any other books? This defining information can be provided in one or two sentences.
3. State the theme or thesis of the book. Remember that the thesis is not necessarily the same as the subject of the book; rather it is the author's main purpose in writing the book. That theme organizes the information the author presents and gives it meaning. You may discover the theme or thesis by reading the introduction or preface, if the book has one. Very often an author will state the thesis in his introduction. He or she may also summarize that thesis in the last chapter or conclusion of the book, so you may want to read the last chapter before you read the entire book thoroughly. Having the thesis in your mind will help guide your reading and the organization of the review you are writing so that you can draw out the most important points of the author's discussion.
4. Having introduced the thesis of the book, you can develop the author's ideas. Begin by summarizing the evidence that the author gives to support this major theme. There is no need to discuss everything the author mentions in the book; highlighting the major points is sufficient in the book review. Also provide your reader with some development of those ideas. You may choose to quote some of the author's words, but avoid long quoted passages. You should show your reader that you have read and understood the book you are reviewing, so most of the review should be in your own words.
5. In a book review, you are also expected to make some judgment concerning the book. You may bring your own experience or expertise to the review whenever possible. There is no need to make such vague remarks as "This book is very interesting." Instead, use something from your own experience--your reading, your thoughts, your recollections--to explain the book and your attitudes toward it. Remember that no book is all good or all bad; every good book has flaws, so it is not necessary to point out every inconsistency or weakness if it does not detract from the major thesis. Try to judge the book as a whole.

The next page contains an example of a professional book review, similar to one that you may be required to write as a student. You may want to use it as a model. In addition, to further develop your review format or organization, you may also want to read other reviews in journals relating to your field.

\*\*Information taken from Richard Marius' *A Short Guide to Writing about History*. Glenview, IL: Scott, Foresman and Co., 1989.

*Deadly Encounters: Two Victorian Sensations.* Richard D. Altick. University of Pennsylvania Press.

While they ate their breakfasts on Saturday, July 13, 1861, Londoners read two fascinating items in the *Times*. One reported THE CHARGE AGAINST THE BARON DE VIDIL. The other, in the very next column, recounted in breathless and horrified detail a FRIGHTFUL ENCOUNTER IN NORTHUMBERLAND-STREET. From that beginning, Richard D. Altick, an authority on Victorian literature and taste, dates the growth of a "public appetite for the improbable and perilous" that gave rise to an Age of Sensation in both newspaper reportage and literature. In *Deadly Encounters*, he thoroughly details the two cases as covered and commented on in the London press and draws some interesting conclusions.

The Baron de Vidil was a French nobleman, an intimate of London clubmen and on friendly terms with the French royal family living in England. One afternoon in a wooded Twickenham lane near London, the Baron, it was alleged, struck with intent to kill his own son. The son brought charges and then, as an avid public followed the case from Magistrate's Court in Bow Street to the Old Bailey, refused to testify against his father, hinting at some still darker secret. The public read on eagerly as a mysterious inheritance and motivations of greed come to light, and the whole case raised questions of class and the place of foreigners in English society.

In the other case, a Major Murray was assaulted and fired upon with a pistol in the rooms of a Mr. Roberts, a small-time moneylender in Northumberland Street, near the Strand. From the appearance of the rooms and the wounds of both--Roberts' injuries soon proved fatal--the encounter was indeed "frightful." The press had a field day. The *Times* called it "a contest where strong and angry men struggle to tear and beat each other down with whatever weapon they can seize in their frenzy." The *Daily Telegraph* called it a "horrible slaughter-house mystery" and opined that there was a woman at the bottom of it. And there was. The Major's illicit romance with a young woman named Anne Marie Moody came to light and the existence of her child was revealed, together with a tale of her borrowing money from Roberts and of his frustrated passion for her and consequent jealousy of Major Murray. The horrified public watched it all unfold in a "spirit of morbid wonder."

Altick quotes extensively from press accounts, and his book is a treasury of overheated prose and outraged Victorian morality. Much of the underlying interest in the Murray case centers on the uncertain and dependent position of women, but the two cases together bring to light the fears beneath the surface of an apparently secure society. Violent criminal cases such as these, Altick makes clear, drove home to mid-Victorian society that "beneath their feet were dangerous unplumbed depths, uncontrollable forces that constantly threatened the peace and stability of their social system. In a direct, stark confrontation, middle-class respectability evidently was no match for remorseless passion . . ."

Less certain, however, is Altick's thesis that these two cases of 1861 and the press coverage of them, brought about an Age of Sensation. Charles Dickens and Wilkie Collins were already being read at that time, and the hugely popular and horrific *Varney the Vampyre*, which Altick doesn't mention at all, had been published in penny parts from 1847 to 1849 and was several times both reprinted and acted on the stage. In real life, the Constance Kent case, an especially gruesome and shocking tale of murder, which Altick mentions only once and briefly, had captured the public fancy a year or so earlier.

Even so, Altick's book vividly preserves an important and fascinating element of daily Victorian life. As such, it is the best sort of historical scholarship: the kind that puts us in close touch with a lost world and with people very much like ourselves.

Reviewed by Alan Ryan for *Smithsonian*, March 1987, pp. 175-177.