# HOW TO WRITE A BOOK REVIEW

**AIMS:** This lecture is an introduction to the process of writing a book review in political studies. It aims to ensure that students acquire the skills necessary to write a literature review – an important component of postgraduate research.

These skills include:

* Extracting relevant information from long texts.
* Identifying the main intent (i.e. thesis) of the book, as well as identifying how this thesis was proven (i.e. identifying the author’s argument).
* Communicating complex ideas and arguments in a simple, but academic style.
* Time management.

**NOTE:** This is only a guide. There are two important things to emphasise: 1) Students should choose a book that they are *interested* in, and; 2) Students need to demonstrate that they have critically engaged with the argument(s) made in the book.

## SECTION ONE: GETTING STARTED

## What is a book review?

A book review is a critical evaluation of an argument put forth in a book. This means that it is not merely a summary of the book; but rather it is a paper that identifies the strengths, weaknesses and significance of the argument the author is trying to prove.

## Selecting a book.

While there is a lot of freedom when it comes to choosing a book to review; it is worthwhile noting:

* It is easier to engage with a book that is not an edited collection of papers. Rather select a book that is composed by a single author, or a set of authors, seeking to prove their own argument.
  + It is possible to review an edited volume, however students would need to assess the selection of essays in light of the editors’ stated objectives for the volume. This may be an overwhelming task.
* The book selected should be interesting as well as relevant to the course. The student must be able to situate the book in the broader context of the course. The purpose behind this is for the student to demonstrate a handle of the field they are studying, as well as to demonstrate the significance of their book for the field.

## SECTION TWO: NOTE TAKING AND READING

## Before reading the book, students should take note of:

* The year the book was written;
* Background information of the author(s)
* Do the author(s) declare any possible biases? Is this significant in relation to their findings?
  + E.g. they own shares in Anglo-American and argue that minimum wages stagnate the economy.
* What is their disciplinary background? Do they use conventional research methods of their field?
  + E.g. political studies; economics; development studies; sociology; and so on.
* How was evidence collected? Were they directly involved? Does that make a difference?

## Suggestions for Note taking:

Depending on the length of the book selected for the review, it may be time-consuming to flip between chapters while writing the actual assignment. To avoid this chaos, it is best for students to write down notes whilst reading the book. Below are some note taking suggestions to offer the class:

* It may be helpful to write in two colours – one for the arguments made by the authors and one for commentary on their points.
* Do not forget to write down the page numbers that these arguments are found on – this will assist with referencing your points later.
* Adhesive flags or sticky notes may be a useful way to mark important sections of the book as you go along.

It may be helpful for students to bear the following questions in mind while reading the book. Jot down cursory answers to them in a notebook. This will assist with writing the review at a later point.

* First and foremost identify the thesis or argument of the book. What is the book’s purpose? What do the authors wish to achieve?
* How do the authors support their thesis? What are the main sub-arguments made to “prove” their main argument?
* Jot down your responses as you are reading – do you find their argument convincing, and why? Have you read something by another author that agrees or disagrees with claims made in the book?
* What type of evidence has been used? (For example, is it qualitative and/or quantitative?) How was it collected? Is it reliable?
* What level of analysis has been used? Macro-, meso-, or micro-?
* What is the topic of the book? Is it well addressed? Is it even-handed and persuasively argued? Would you recommend the book? Why?

## Reading suggestions:

Reading and reviewing a book is a more demanding task than lifting points from a journal article to support an argument in an essay. It requires that students engage with the logic of the authors. Students need to follow how the authors use the different chapters of their book in order to build and support their thesis.

Students need to learn how to read strategically. This will help them prepare for postgraduate studies, where they will be required to read a large number of articles and books for their various assignments. Students take information in differently, and so it is important to emphasise that this is merely a suggestion for how to approach reading their books, but ultimately they need to find a strategy that works for them.

* Read the introduction thoroughly. The authors should make it clear in the introduction what they are seeking to prove, and how they have set about doing this.
* Once the aim of the book is understood, read over the table of contents. The titles of the chapters may provide further insight into the logic and structure used by the authors.
* As you get to each chapter, read the introduction, sub-headings and conclusion. This will allow for an advanced understanding of what the chapter itself will be arguing. Then read the chapter from start to finish. Do not forget to assess whether or not the aim of the chapter was achieved, and if this helps to support the main thesis of the book.
* Be careful to note the structure of the book – has it helped make the argument easy to understand, or was the book poorly organised?
* Lastly, it is important to bear in the mind the overall argument that the author is trying to make. Constantly return to this thesis.

# SECTION THREE: WRITING THE BOOK REVIEW

## Structure:

While there is no set structure for a book review as such, it is important for it to include the following components:

Introduction: This is similar to most introductions in essays for Political Studies. This should include the title of the book, author(s) of the book, the main argument made in the book, and the student’s thesis statement (or intended argument). If it flows appropriately, students may want to demonstrate in the introduction why the book they have selected is relevant to the themes addressed in the course.

Brief overview: A section that provides the grader with an overview (or summary) of the *main*arguments made in the book should follow the introduction. This section should convey information that is relevant for the grader to understand the logic that the author used. This requires that students write succinctly and with clarity. Additional information that is important for the grader to know about the authors, their method used and so on should also be conveyed. ***It is crucial that students understand that this is not the main focus of their paper. The bulk of their paper should be spent on their analysis of the book.***

Analysis: This should be the main focus on the review. It should have been made clear in the introduction what the main argument the student wishes to prove is. Each paragraph should address a clear component of this argument. Remind students that they need not agree or disagree with everything in the book. They can evaluate how well some parts of the argument made by the authors was, as well as show the shortcomings of other aspects of it. Students should be reminded that they need not evaluate the book chapter-by-chapter. This will probably lead to a dry review. Instead, they should organise their paper by focusing on key themes.

Two important points should be noted for this section: 1) students may use external sources to support their arguments. 2) Students should avoid using quotations. It should be explained to them that quotations should only be used if it serves a particular purpose for the point that they are making – for example, the particular language used by the author was problematic.

Students should be reminded that they are expected to write in an even-handed, academic style. They have hopefully selected a book about a topic that they are passionate about. While this should be encouraged, they also need to be sure to substantiate the assertions that they make and to avoid emotive writing.

Conclusion: This is not very different to conclusions in other Political Studies assignments. Students should highlight the main points that their review sought to prove. Remind students that this is their final opportunity to coherently demonstrate their understanding of the book that they read, as well as restate their main response(s) to it.

## Warn Students to Avoid:

Students should be careful not to:

* Make the summary section of the review the main section. Students should only extract the points that the authors made in order to prove their argument.
* Students must avoid relying on quotations. It is important to illustrate the difference between paraphrasing and quoting. Remind students that they need to use their own words to rephrase the argument made by the author (paraphrasing) as well as reference the relevant pages in the book from which these points were drawn.
* Students should only include biographical information about the authors that are significant for the review. The point of considering biographical information would be to demonstrate that the students understand possible biases that the authors may have.
  + Remind students that there should be a purpose behind any information that they introduce at any point in their paper. The grader will be asking: “why are you telling me this?” It is up to the student to ensure that the purpose for the information that they provide is clear.

## Helpful tips:

* Students could use book reviews penned by other academics as additional resources. Reading these reviews should help them learn how to structure their own review. Remind them that while using other reviews as a source are encouraged, they still need to ensure that their own voice is clear in their review. This would include assessing whether they think that the comments made in the review are fair.
* Planning is an essential part of writing a coherent and clear paper. Students should be encouraged to plan their papers well ahead of time and to use their tutors’ consultation hour in order to ensure that they are structuring their paper appropriately.
* Students could narrow the scope of their review by focusing on a particular component of the argument presented in the book that they review. For example, if the book addresses the topic of aid to Africa generally; the student may select one of the sub-themes that the book emphasises – such as dependency.

Suggested resource: <http://www.queensu.ca/writingcentre/handouts/Disciplines-BookReviews.pdf>



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