Critical Book Review Guide: Writing an Historical Book Review

Writing a book review as an assignment in a history course has at least four important objectives: (1) effective written communication, (2) a substantive knowledge about a particular historical topic, (3) an understanding of the nature and use of historical research, and (4) an ability to think critically about the work of others. A typical summary "book report" can at best teach only the first two competencies. A book review goes beyond mere summary to inquire into the overall worth of a book. There are six steps to preparing a review of an historical work. With some modification, these steps also apply to writing reviews of other nonfiction works.

Please read this Guide completely and comprehensively before asking your instructor any questions.

Step 1: Select a Nonfiction Book
There are many ways to find a nonfiction book appropriate for this type of task. Before your begin your search, check with your instructor for guidelines or parameters regarding acceptable book topics.

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<th>Course</th>
<th>Book Review #1 Parameters</th>
<th>Book Review #2 Parameters</th>
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<tr>
<td>AP European History (APEH)</td>
<td>Nonfiction history or biography, c. 300+ pages, European topic 1450 to present.</td>
<td>N/A</td>
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<tr>
<td>AP United States History (APUSH)</td>
<td>Nonfiction history or biography, American topic from Pre-Columbian Era to 1877. c. 250+ pgs</td>
<td>Nonfiction history or biography, American topic from 1877 to present. c. 250+ pgs</td>
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NOTE: Books used in other high school classes are not permitted. In APUSH, cumulative books (those covering both time periods) may be used for either semester, but may not be repeated. All books must be approved by your instructor.

Once you know that information, you can begin your search. You may start, of course, with the Suggested Readings after each chapter in the text or with the electronic card catalog in your school library. You can check standard bibliographies, and try consulting the footnotes or bibliographies of other works. It may be more convenient, however, for you to search on-line booksellers or even browse a local bookstore or public library. When you locate a likely book, give it a “once over.” Glance at the table of contents and the bibliography and read the prefatory material to make sure that the book is appropriate to your assignment. Ask yourself if the topic seems interesting, for you will probably write a better review if you have some affinity for the subject. Most importantly, contact your instructor for feedback and approval on the book you’ve selected.

Step 2: Determine the Purpose of the Book
The best place to discover this is usually in the preface, forward, or introduction. What demand did the author intend to fulfill with the book? Did she write because there was no satisfactory work available on the subject? Did she feel that she had a new point of view on a well-worn topic? Perhaps she wrote a popular account of a subject about which previous works had been dry and dull. Determine the audience for which the work was intended. Was the work directed mainly at professional historians, at college students or the general public? Ascertaining the author’s purpose is important, for, assuming that the purpose is worthwhile, the writer should be judged by whether she achieved what she set out to accomplish.

Step 3: Learn the Author's Qualifications and Viewpoint
Find out the author's academic background. Is he a journalist, a professor, a professional writer? Has he written other books on related topics? Consult the electronic card catalog and/or the Directory of American Scholars. This

1 Source: Historical Book Review Guide adapted from Dr. Robert Frost, University at Albany, Albany, NY (c. 1992)

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information also may be available via an internet search or through an on-line database to which your institution may subscribe. Viewpoint, however, is generally more important than credentials, since an author must be judged mainly by the quality of the particular work you are examining. A Pulitzer Prize-winner may later write an undistinguished book. But many first books, often derived from the author's doctoral dissertation, are outstanding. Knowing an author's point of view, however, may put a reader on guard for certain biases. A Marxist historian will often write from a predictable perspective, as well as an extreme rightist. For example, after the death of Charles de Gaulle, many of his intimates, most notably Jacques Soustelle, wrote biographical works. A reviewer could not adequately analyze Jacques Soustelle’s biography of de Gaulle without knowing something about the author's close relationship with the general-president. Look for information on point of view in prefatory materials, in the body of the book, and in reference works with entries about the author.

Step 4: Read the Book
Read critically and analytically. Be sure to identify the author's thesis—the main argument of the book. As you read the book, keep the author’s thesis at the forefront of your thoughts. Look for secondary theses and other important points. See how the author uses evidence and examples to support the arguments. Are the sources adequate and convincing? Does the author rely mainly on primary (firsthand, documentary sources) or secondary sources? Consider the author’s style and presentation. Is the book well organized? Is the prose lively, direct, engaging and clear? Take notes as you read so that you can return to particularly important passages or especially revealing quotations. Remember that being critical means rational and thoughtful, not necessarily negative.

Step 5: Outline the Review
The following outline is only a suggestion; it is not a model that you should necessarily follow for all reviews. You may find it appropriate to add, combine, eliminate, or rearrange some points. The developed outline will then serve as the basis for your formal written book review.

I. Introduction
   a. Purpose of the book
   b. Author’s qualifications and viewpoint. Use another source other than the book you’re reviewing to gain information about the author(s). At the end of your review, cite the source as per MLA standards or similar style guide.
II. Summary and critical assessment of the author’s argument
   a. Thesis of the book
   b. Summary of book’s content, indicating how the thesis is developed. Use examples to illustrate.
   c. Assess the credibility of the argument.
III. Critical assessment of book
   a. Organization
   b. Style and presentation (word choice, paragraph structure, wit, readability, length, etc.)
   c. Use of supporting materials (footnotes/endnotes, pictures, graphs, maps, charts, tables, index, etc.)
   d. Intended audience (What readership is the author hoping to reach? Is the book academic in orientation or is it more popular history?)
IV. Conclusion
   a. Historical contribution of the book. (How does the book fit into prevailing interpretation of the subject? Does it answer a troublesome question? Does it break new ground? Does it revise older interpretations? Does it merely clarify and simplify the standard point of view? Where does the book fit in the literature on the topic?)
   b. Overall worth of the book (Would you recommend it? For what type of audience would it be best suited? Did the author accomplish his/her purpose?)

Step 6: Write the Review
Follow the outline. Use standard written English. If your instructor does not assign a standard book review format, the following style is generally accepted.

• At the top of the first page, give the standard bibliographic citation of the work under review. (Reviews seldom have titles of their own). Include the author, full title, copyright date, publishing company, publishing city and number of pages. List your citation as per MLA standards or similar style guide. If you’re reviewing a book
that you read on an e-reader, please indicate which e-reader you’ve used. For example, write “Kindle” or “iPad” at the end of your bibliographic citation. This citation should only occupy 1-2 lines of your heading.

• Type the review double-spaced. Book reviews must be 4 to 5 pages (c. 1000 to 1250 words) in length.

SPARTAN APPS/GOOGLE DOCS USERS - please be mindful to double check your margins and formatting as Google Docs tends to modify them when printing.

✓ If you quote from the book under review, simply follow the quotation with the page number(s) in parentheses. For example: The author argues that “American women seem to have preferred careers over parenting” (p. 345). Quotes that go over three lines in length should be single-spaced in a “block quote” format with the page citation at the end of the block quote.

✓ If you have to cite other sources for quotations or facts, use a standard citation style.

✓ Reviews should be written in a formal manner. As with other written assignments, be sure to avoid using colloquialisms (“a lot” or “etc.”), contractions (“cannot” instead of “can’t”) and avoid using the first person (I, you, we, us).

• The review is to be an original review written by you.

You may find it helpful to read published book reviews as a guide to the preparation of your own. Most historical journals, including the American Historical Review and the Journal of Modern History publish many short reviews at the end of each issue. Additionally, major publications such as The New York Times and The Economist offer weekly book reviews. Assume that your audience is college educated and well read, but do not assume that your hypothetical reader has in-depth knowledge about the subject of the book under review.

Prior to writing your book review, please read and review the APEH & APUSH Critical Book Review Rubric, the rubric on which your book review will be assessed.

Lastly, all books being reviewed for this assignment need to be works of nonfiction. Do not refer to your book as a “novel.” It is not. Novels are fiction. Your book is nonfiction. Of course, your nonfiction book may “read like a novel.” The author(s) would likely take this as a compliment.

Contact your instructor if you have questions or concerns.