How to Write a Graduate Level Book Review

Your review should have two goals: first, to inform the reader about the content of the book, and second, to provide an evaluation that gives your judgment of the book’s quality.

Your introduction should include an overview of the book that both incorporates an encapsulated summary and a sense of your general judgment. This is the equivalent to a thesis statement.

Do NOT spend more than one-third or so of the paper summarizing the book. The summary should consist of a discussion and highlights of the major arguments, features, trends, concepts, themes, ideas, and characteristics of the book. While you may use direct quotes from the book (make sure you always give the page number), such quotes should never be the bulk of the summary. Much of your grade will depend on how well you describe and explain the material IN YOUR OWN WORDS. You might want to take the major organizing themes of the book and use them to organize your own discussion. This does NOT mean, however, that I want a chapter-by-chapter summary. Your goal is a unified essay.

So what do I want, if not just a summary? Throughout your summary, I want you to provide a critique of the book. (Hence the title: “A Critical Book Review.”) A critique consists of thoughts, responses, and reactions. It is not necessarily negative. Nor do you need to know as much about the subject as the author (because you hardly ever will). The skills you need are an ability to follow an argument and test a hypothesis. Regardless of how negative or positive your critique is, you need to be able to justify and support your position.

Here are a number of questions that you can address as part of your critique. You need not answer them all, but questions one and two are essential to any book review, so those must be included. And these are ABSOLUTELY NOT to be answered one after another (seriatim). Don’t have one paragraph that answers one, and then the next paragraph that answers the next, etc. The answers should be part of a carefully constructed essay, complete with topic sentences and transitions.

1. What is your overall opinion of the book? On what basis has this opinion been formulated? That is, tell the reader what you think and how you arrived at this judgment. What did you expect to learn when you picked up the book? To what extent – and how effectively – were your expectations met? Did you nod in agreement (or off to sleep)? Did you wish you could talk back to the author? Amplify upon and explain your reactions.

2. Identify the author’s thesis and explain it in your own words. How clearly and in what context is it stated and, subsequently, developed? To what extent and how effectively (i.e., with what kind of evidence) is this thesis proven? Use examples to amplify your responses. If arguments or perspectives were missing, why do you think this might be?

3. What are the author’s aims? How well have they been achieved, especially with regard to the way the book is organized? Are these aims supported or justified? (You might look back at the introduction to the book for help). How closely does the organization follow the author’s aims?
4. How are the author’s main points presented, explained, and supported? What assumptions lie behind these points? What would be the most effective way for you to compress and/or reorder the author’s scheme of presentation and argument?

5. How effectively does the author draw claims from the material being presented? Are connections between the claims and evidence made clearly and logically? Here you should definitely use examples to support your evaluation.

6. What conclusions does the author reach and how clearly are they stated? Do these conclusions follow from the thesis and aims and from the ways in which they were developed? In other words, how effectively does the book come together?

7. Identify the assumptions made by the author in both the approach to and the writing of the book. For example, what prior knowledge does the author expect readers to possess? How effectively are those assumptions worked into the overall presentation? What assumptions do you think should not have been made? Why?

8. Does the author’s presentation seem fair and accurate? Is the interpretation biased? Can you detect any distortion, exaggeration, or diminishing of material? If so, for what purpose might this have been done, and what effect does it have on the overall presentation?

**Here’s a Good General Outline Format to Follow for a Critical Book Review:**

- **Thesis**
- **Support** (Brief summary of chapters/ author’s supporting arguments, etc.)
- **Strengths**
- **Weaknesses**
- **Conclusion** (Your overall assessment; the place, value, and contribution(s) the book makes to the course’s area of study)