

Book reviews: what they are, how to write them and where to find them

1. The purpose of book reviews

Book reviews are important sources of information about current work being carried out in different subject fields. They serve not only to announce the existence of new titles, but also to evaluate the book concerned. They are essential reading for lecturers and researchers who need to keep up with the latest literature on the subject, but who do not have the time or opportunity to actually look at all the new books in their area of interest. They also serve to bring outstanding works of scholarship to the notice of the non-specialist.

For the student they have two further uses:

Firstly, when you are trying to assess the value and importance of a textbook you could try to find reviews of the book. A word of warning here: sometimes the reviewers get it wrong! They might have praised a book which subsequently proved to be a disaster, or they may have failed to recognise an important new contribution to the literature. A classic example of the latter is Margaret Mead's book 'Coming of Age in Samoa' which was not recognised as the important text it turned out to be.

Secondly, if you cannot actually find a book on the library shelves, an alternative way of gaining information about its contents may be to find a lengthy review.

2. The content of book reviews

In academic journals reviews are usually written at the invitation of the journal editor, and apart from some possible restrictions on the length of the review, there is no standard format for the content. Regarding length, book reviews usually fall into one of three categories: short notices, between 500-800 words, which often allow for no more than a brief resume of the book, reviews of 1000-1500 words which allow more scope for discussion and review-essays of 2000 words or more which lend themselves to a broader and more general treatment of the subject. Although there is no set formula as far as the contents of reviews are concerned, there is some agreement on what constitutes a good or bad review (1) (2) & (3).

A good review should include the following information:

- full bibliographical details
- author's qualifications
- the overall content of the book, its scope and intended audience and its standing among other similar books on the same topic
- the author's premises on which the work is based and the conclusions reached
- the major issues stated and points raised in the book together with the extent to which these have been adequately covered
- any particularly strong viewpoint or bias
- the strengths and weaknesses of the book
- an evaluation of the style of writing
- the personal judgement of the reviewer as to the book's worth

Bad reviews are reviews where many of the above points are omitted or where the reviewer has failed to read the book properly, but, in particular, bad reviews are those where the reviewer has allowed personal views or grievances to dominate. Good reviewers take the responsibility of reviewing very seriously and try and remain impartial, giving a personal opinion, but not allowing personal animosity to intrude. Evidence of this occurring might be where a reviewer criticises the book in a negative way because it failed to accomplish what the reviewer would have done if he had handled the subject, or where the reviewer's judgement has been warped by a minor details such as not citing the reviewer's own works.

3. How to write reviews

Writing a review of a textbook has become a popular assignment in many modules. A useful review of how a reviewer sets about reviewing a book is given in Schwartz (1) and Cannadine (3). Reviewers are expected to be knowledgeable about the subject of the books they are reviewing, so if you have only just started studying the subject, you may feel you do not have sufficient information on which to base your judgement. However, as long as you have read the book thoroughly and you make sure you cover as many points of a good review as you can, you should be able to make a reasonable attempt.

4. Finding reviews

There are several routes to locating reviews; you can use journal and newspaper indexes, specialist review journals, subject journals which have review sections, or their electronic equivalents. Which ever you start with, you should have the details of the author, title and date of the publication of the book for which you want reviews.

4.1 Printed Sources

4.1.1 Journal and Newspaper Indexes

Book Review Digest 1984 - (10 times a year) **J 028.1 B**

This index is solely devoted to giving references to reviews of books. Since it is published in the USA, its emphasis is on books published or distributed in North America. It is arranged alphabetically by authors' names.

British Humanities Index 1966 - 2002 **Harcourt Hill**

Look under the name of the author of the book to find references to reviews of it.

Times Index 1964 - 2002 **Newspaper Area, Headington**

Between 1964-1972 this index provides references to reviews published in The Times, and from 1973 onwards to those published also in The Times Literary Supplement and the Sunday Times. Look under heading 'Books' where references are arranged by the title of the book.

4.1.2 Review Journals

If a book has been published recently, the references to the sources of its review may not yet have been caught up by the indexes, so scanning the recent issues of the following review journals might be useful:

Times Literary Supplement 1978- **J 028 T**
[Indexed in **The Times Index**]

London Review of Books 1982- **J 028 L**

New York Review of Books 1985- **J 028 N**

Some weekly journals also devote extensive space to book reviews. These include:

New Statesman 1996- **J 300 N**
(formerly **New Statesman and Society**, June 1988 -1996)

Times Higher Educational Supplement **J 378 T**
[Indexed in **The Times Index**]

4.1.3 Subject Journals

Book reviews form an important part of many subject journals, e.g.-

Sociology

American Journal of Sociology **J 301 A**

British Journal of Sociology **J 301 B**

Contemporary Sociology **J 301 C**

The sole purpose of this journal is to review new sociological books

Journal of Social Policy **J 360 J**

Sociological Review **J 301 S**

Sociology **J 301 S**

4.2 Electronic sources

4.2.1 Electronic indexes to journals and newspapers (databases)

Most electronic databases can be used as indexes to book reviews. In some cases where databases have access to full journal articles the full text of the review can also be retrieved.

Listed below is a selection:

Applied Science and Technology Full Text

To limit search to book reviews click on 'Books Reviewed' in the box which defaults to 'All-Smart Search'.

Art Abstracts

To find book reviews proceed as for **Applied Science and Technology Full Text**.

ASSIA - Applied Social Sciences Index

To find book reviews, type in 'book review' in the search box provided.

Avery Index to Architectural Periodicals

To find book reviews go into advanced search and specify book reviews as keywords.

BHI (electronic version of British Humanities Index)

To find book reviews proceed as for **ASSIA**.

JSTOR

This is a multidisciplinary database with an emphasis on older material and is therefore a good database to use for book reviews from the earlier part of the 20th Century. Type in 'book review' in the search box and include some other subject or title keywords to reduce the number of hits, as this is a very large database. The full text of the review is usually available.

ProQuest Newspapers

This is a collection of UK newspapers online. It is fully up to date and contains full text book reviews from The Guardian, The Times, The Daily Telegraph and The Independent and the Sunday newspapers. In advanced search under 'citation and article text' type in details of the book and include the word 'review'.

4.2.2 Electronic review journals

The London Review of Books <http://www.lrb.co.uk/help/index.php>

This website gives a selection of the reviews available. It also provides an index to the print versions for the last five years.

BookWire <http://www.bookwire.com/bookwire/search.html>

This website gives reviews from a number of US sources including the **Boston Book Review**.

4.2.3 Electronic subject journals

Electronic journals, like their print counterparts, are often a good source of book reviews. To access electronic journals at Brookes, go to the Library Home Page, click on 'Electronic Library' and then click on 'Electronic Journals'.

4.2.4 Internet

Book reviews can also be found on the internet by using a search engine such as google

<http://www.google.com>

This is especially useful for reviews of older, seminal works, say from the fifties and sixties, which are too old to be included in most electronic databases. See also **JSTOR** (above) for older material. Just type in the name of the author and the title of the book.

References

1. Schwartz, L. S. 'Getting started in book reviewing' in S.K. Burack (ed) The Writer's Handbook Boston: The Writer, 1983 pp. 380-387
2. Woodbury, R.B. 'On book reviewing' American Anthropologist, 79(3) 1977 pp. 551-554.
3. Cannadine, D. 'On reviewing and being reviewed' History Today, 49 (3) 1999 pp. 30-33.

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