

How To Write a Book Review

“Reading makes a man full, Conversation makes a man ready, writing makes a man exact.” Francis Bacon

Part of the objectives of any seminary is to develop graduates who are capable of publishing academic articles and book reviews. To this end, HT 501 and 502 have as part of their assignment, book reviews, in order to help the students advance in this skill set.

Why Write a Book Review

A seminary education is to prepare students for a lifetime of study. In any ministry, from teaching kids to teaching adults, the teacher must first of all be a learner, a student. When I was young my pastor would comment from the pulpit that if someone wanted to be a pastor, he needed to be a reader. It is one thing to read a lot, this is only a part of the process. As Francis Bacon states reading makes a man full.

By reading we are introduced to new information, to a new world of knowledge and ideas. We learn facts, information. Today we live in the information age and we are overwhelmed by data. We can instantly find enormous amounts of information. But it isn't necessarily organized or correlated well. It's like a strand of pearls with thousands of pearls, but no thread joining any of them.

Reading good books will help us see these connections and help tie the parts together. But reading is not just for more data or facts. Reading is a conversation with the author and enables our thoughts to go in new directions. In some cases, it is not about what the writer has said, as much as how the writer's statements have generated new thoughts and ideas in our own minds. Reading is not a passive activity, it should be very active. Read with a pad and pen handy to make notes.

As we acquire information, we must move from that stage to the stage of developing knowledge. Information is not the same as knowledge, but it is the basis for knowledge. Knowledge is the result of taking information and correlating it, organizing it, and applying it to different circumstances. One key to this is conversation.

Conversation takes it a step further. Discussion with colleagues, other students, and friends is very important. Entering into friendly debates sharpens our thinking, reveals misunderstandings we might have, and enables us to learn how to structure our thoughts and express them in ways that communicate and enlighten others. Some people process their own thoughts better through talking, but also others through writing. As we verbally discuss the information, our knowledge is developed. But this is not enough; we must learn to be exacting, precise in the way we think and the way we teach. This develops wisdom.

Information is not knowledge, knowledge is not wisdom. However, we cannot develop wisdom without knowledge and cannot develop knowledge without information. We must be warned against confusing these three. Writing is key to developing a precise mind.

Writing is very important for students. Writing involves a tremendous amount of thought. It demands organization, logical structure, and the ability to select what must be said and eliminate what is not relevant and vital to the topic. Unfortunately, many students fail to organize their writing and just throw out everything in a disorganized, stream of consciousness flow. This is certainly not acceptable.

Writing a book review will help you deepen your analysis of what the author is attempting to demonstrate, and how that has been accomplished. It will force you to think more precisely and to avoid being simply a passive reader.

Helpful Steps in Writing a Review.

First, read the book! This sounds simple at first glance. But how do you read a book? Most of us think we know, but we actually do not know unless someone along the way has taught us.

After I graduated from university with a Bachelors degree in History and English, I ran across a book entitled, *How to Read a Book*, by Mortimer J. Adler.¹ After reading it, I wished I had read it before beginning university, and maybe even in high school. I strongly recommend that every student from high school on take the time to read this book.

1. Guidelines for reading any book.

A. Read the “Forward,” “Preface,” and “Introduction” to understand why the author is writing the book, to whom they are writing, what they are trying to demonstrate or prove (their thesis), and how they say they will accomplish this.

What is the basic issue, problem, or question addressed by the book?

What is the author’s basic thesis? What is the reason for writing the book?

How is the book organized to support the thesis?

B. Read the “Conclusion” to learn the summary of what was accomplished, how it was accomplished, and the author’s summary of their work.

C. Read through the Table of Contents, if it is done well you should be able to learn how the thought progresses. Also, skim the indexes to see what is included, and what has been left out.

D. The first reading should be a brief skim of the book to catch the author’s flow of thought and development of the thesis. This can be done in a relatively short period of time.

E. The second reading is when the text is read in more detail. Highlight and/or look up key words or phrases. Look for connecting words that show the development of the

¹ Mortimer J. Adler, Charles Van Doren, *How to Read a Book* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1986).

author's argument. Write notes in the margins to indicate your questions, observations, and evaluations.

F. As you do this, have a note pad and pen at hand to begin writing down ideas. As you read, not only highlight key statements related to the demonstration of the author's thesis, but make notes about how well the case is made for the thesis. Read with a highlighter and pen to make notes on the pages of the book.

G. Under ideal conditions, the book should be read more than once, or some portions read more than once.

Here are some questions to have in your mind.

Who is the author? What is his/her background? Theological viewpoint? Education? Experience?

What does the author say is the purpose for the book?

Does the book accomplish what it says it will do?

How has the book contributed within its field? Why is it important?

Is the book well organized? Is it well written?

Are their new terms in the book? Are they clearly defined?

How well does the author document what he presents? (footnotes, bibliography).

Is there an index?

How helpful was the book in understanding the issues addressed?

2. Evaluating the Book

After skimming and reading the book, organize your thoughts. Take some time to identify the main arguments used by the author. Think about his evidence for his arguments. What might be his presuppositions? What is his/her overall framework? To what school of thought might he belong

Some questions to keep in mind as you evaluate the argument.

How does this work help us understand the time period involved, or the fundamental structures of the issue or topic?

What types of evidence does the author use? What can you say about his logical presentation? Are there any logical fallacies? To what does the author appeal as the final authority?

How is the author's perspective similar or different from other books on the topic?

Has the author convinced you of their view?

3. Writing the book review.

A. Begin with a complete bibliographic citation based on the style of Turabian. Author, Full title, place of publication, publisher, date of publication, edition, number of pages, special features (maps, indexes) and ISBN

Part of this may include a brief summary of the author, his/her background, school of thought, or influence. What is his/her presuppositional frame of reference? And to whom is he/she writing?

B. One paragraph should identify the purpose for the book (the thesis), and how the author expressed his purpose and how they planned to achieve it.

C. Several paragraphs should explain the logical progression of the author's case. What is his structure? What is the flow of the argument? What are the essential arguments used?

D. How well does the author summarize his case? Use examples from his writing to illustrate and substantiate your critique.

E. What do you think are the strengths of the book? Give examples.

F. What do you think are the weaknesses of the book? Give examples.

G. Summarize some key things you learned from the book.

4. Errors to avoid.

A. Do not simply summarize the book, a book review is essentially a critical evaluation of a book.

B. Do not write a research paper, the purpose of a book review is to present the author's work, his interpretation of the topic, his strengths and weaknesses. A book review is not a research paper on the topic.

C. Read the book in its entirety.

D. Organize your paper well; do not simply write from a stream of consciousness or you will not receive a passing grade.

E. In your evaluation, do not rely on your opinion, but on well reasoned and supported arguments.

F. Give specific examples of positive and negative features of the book.

Conclusion

The book review should be typed, not hand written. All papers or CTS classes must conform to the standards of the Turabian style book.

Additional information

Writing theological book reviews.

<https://www.trinity.utoronto.ca/library/research/theology/writing-theological-book-reviews/>

https://issuu.com/sbtswritingcenter/docs/book_review_guide_updated