

Writing Book Reviews in Political Science

This handout suggests ways to think about and organize your book review.* However, before following this format, please consult the specific directions given to you by your instructor.

Goal of a book review:

A book review is very different from a book report. The goal of a book review is to 1) display substantial knowledge of the book's content; 2) to determine where to situate this book in the world of knowledge that is political science; 3) to evaluate its strengths and weaknesses; and 4) to determine who would find this book helpful.

Content of a book review

A book review should answer at least these four questions:

- 1) What is the point of the book? Another way of asking this is what is the author's thesis, and how does s/he make an argument for that thesis?
- 2) Who (as in other authors) or what (as in theories or general trends in the literature) is the author arguing for and against? That is, where does she place herself in the larger field of political science—what methodology does she use, what assumptions does she make (both explicit and implicit), what implications does she see?
- 3) How clearly did the author communicate her message?
- 4) Was the message convincing – why or why not? – and why should we care?

Argument of a book review

Like all political science papers, book reviews assert a claim – they do more than summarize what the author says. The thesis of your book review will respond to questions 3 and 4 above—could you make sense of and understand the argument of the book as a whole? Did the author convince you of his point, and how significant is this point?

In considering your thesis, and in presenting your argument, you will need criteria for judging the book. Here are some suggestions of criteria to think about while reading the book and while formulating your argument:

- How important is the subject to the study of politics and government?
 - If the author does a great job but asks a dumb question or comes up with 'no duh' answer, how helpful is his work?
 - If the author's work is awesome but incomprehensible, how helpful is her work?

* Some of this material was drawn from *The Political Science Student Writer's Manual* (1998) by Gregory M. Scott and Stephen M. Garrison.

- How complete and thorough is the author's coverage of the subject? How good is his or her evidence?
 - Does the author include sufficient evidence or neglect necessary evidence?
 - Use of evidence is crucial: how convinced are you that the author provided all the evidence you needed to know what you need to know about his or her argument?
- How carefully is the author's analysis conducted?
 - What do we mean by analysis? Here's an example of analysis v. description.
 - Description: When I board a plane headed to Seattle in January, I see mostly waterproof, high-tech jackets rather than wool coats.
 - Analysis: From this, and the fact that I've lived here long enough to invest in several waterproof jackets (and shoes!), I intuit/analyze that most people who live in the northwest dress in layers and often have waterproof jackets. There are always a few people with wool coats, however, and I always assume that they do not currently live in Seattle. Thus, when I enter the plane, I make educated/analytic guesses about who the people returning home to Seattle are, and who the visitors or people traveling through Seattle are.
 - The difference between describing what happened, and determining the significance or importance of what happened is what we mean by analysis.
- What are the strengths and limitations of the author's methodology?
 - Does he or she use only quantitative methods? Only qualitative methods?
 - Could their analysis be improved by mixing methods, or by using other sources?
- What is the quality of the writing? Is it clear, precise, and interesting?
 - If the author has great data, and all the tables and graphs make sense, but you still have no idea what the book was about, that's a real problem.
 - Good social science writing is approachable and clear, even if the author is discussing complex ideas or institutions.
 - Not all authors are good writers: it's OK to critique them for this.

- How does this book compare with others on the subject?
 - You should probably at least skim a few of the other texts that the author uses or critiques: you don't need to read the whole thing (although bonus points if you do!), but you should have a sense of whether the author you are reading does justice to the author's he uses and/or critiques.
- What contribution does this book make to political science?
 - A HUGE contribution: everyone in the field of political science should read this book.
 - A decent contribution: this will be very helpful to some, but others just won't care.
 - No contribution at all: is this even political science? How did this book get printed??
 - You must say very clearly WHY for all three possible answers.
- Who will enjoy or benefit from this book?
 - Scholars who do XXXX for a living?
 - Bureaucrats?
 - Students in an intro level class?
 - People who want a general overview of the field of XXXX?
 - Policy-makers?
 - Social movement leaders?
 - Who else?

Organization of a book review

- *Introduction.* In this paragraph you should briefly introduce the work under discussion, and state your thesis.
- *Summary.* Following your introduction you should **concisely** restate the central claim(s) of the author. In this section be particularly sure to remain faithful to the ideas of the author as he or she states them. At the same time, aim for the essence of the book: What is the author's main point? What are the significant subpoints? Make sure that your summary is short and to the point.
- *Body of the paper.* The largest portion of your review should be devoted to elaborating and expanding on your thesis. In this section you will move step by step through the criteria you have selected to assess the book; for each criterion you will show how the author's effort holds up.
- *Conclusion.* Wrap up your paper with a statement about the significance of the book; this statement may concern the extent of its contribution to the discipline of political science or explain how it changed your understanding of a certain phenomenon.