

Chapter-26

How to write a Book Review

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Books are considered “tools for communication between two minds.” A well written and comprehensive review can let you know whether that book worked as a communication tool between the author and reader or not.¹ The scholarly book review is a kind of academic writing that helps to explain and critically appraise the subject matter, value, sense, and importance of a book.^{2,3} Usually, book reviewing is an unpaid job, and it is considered as a service to the profession.⁴ Therefore, it is necessary that reviewer should be willing to contribute in the field and should have the knowledge of the subject.

A review is the personal reflection of the reviewer’s opinion about the book, in which he/she communicates to the readers; such as was the book good and worth reading? Was it thought-provoking and informative? To whom (audience) it is recommended?⁴ There is some difference between reviewing fiction and non-fiction books. In this article, our focus is reviewing a non-fiction book.

There is no hard and fast rule regarding the length of the review. However, a review comprising of 500-1000 words is good enough. It provides sufficient space to a reviewer for presenting his/her ideas or comments with considerable supportive examples and arguments’.¹ Mostly, journals have a word limit for writing a book review. However, the worth of a review rarely have connection with its length.⁵

There are two approaches to book reviewing such as descriptive and critical.^{4,6}

Descriptive reviews: In this type, reviewer gives an objective account of the information presented within the book. The reviewer is expected to give a brief description of the book by stating the purpose of the book.

Critical reviews: It may include a descriptive note, but it also appraises the book according to the recognized “academic, scholastic and literary” norms.^{4,6}

Purpose:

A book review is a snapshot of a newly published book to prospective readers, and it succinctly introduces the book content and expresses the reviewer’s opinion about it. A good book review helps the readers to decide whether or not to read/buy/recommend a book. Book reviews are beneficial to the textbook editors and authors for improving their next editions, and for the publishers to work out for future books.^{3,7,8}

The literature points out that there is no any absolute rules for writing a book review,⁹ however, a broad rule of thumb is that a good book review should have three components.^{3,10}

1. **An introductory paragraph:** It describes the main theme and contribution of the book in the field. Thus basically it explains what the book is about. It also describes the pertinent information about the author and what’s his/her standing in the field.
2. **The body of the review:** It describes the key points of the book. It is the responsibility of a reviewer to avoid too much detail and discuss only few core points, and provide concrete evidence for assertions. In this section, few quotes or phrases can be used from the book to elucidate the reviewer’s points.
3. **A conclusion:** In this section, reviewer critiques the book and point out the weaknesses and strengths in the use of evidence/s, the kind of provided evidence/s, and the inferences drawn. For concluding the write-up, the reviewer is required to sum up the ideas to provide the reader an outcome regarding the book.

A good book review is considered a commentary on the book not a summary of the book. Therefore, one should focus on giving his/her opinions and reflections on the book instead of providing a detailed description of the contents.⁹ An effective review should be educational, attractive and opinionated.¹¹ Ideally, a book review should be written by an expert but anyone else who has some basic core knowledge of the subject, which the book covers can also do this job and write a satisfactory review.⁹

While reviewing a book, one must look at the following points carefully:

1. Subject of the book
2. Quality of the contents
3. Single author or multi-author book
4. Chapters or sections
5. Preface
6. Foreword and who has written it
7. References
8. Index
9. The International Standard Book Number (ISBN)
10. Quality of paper and printing
11. Quality of photographs, illustrations if any
12. Highlighted important points in various chapters in Box
13. Price
14. Overall printing and binding

While reviewing any book, first of all carefully read its preface, it will give you the objective of writing that book and other related information. In the next step, every book written by an eminent author is already reviewed by some expert or eminent personality in that particular field whom the authors usually invite to write a foreword for that book. It will help you a great deal and guide you about the authenticity of the issues, subjects discussed in the book, which is always covered by those writing the foreword.

While reading the book first time, one can highlight the important points, which will be useful while writing the review.

While writing the review, make sure that you do not miss any important point or message in the book. A subject specialist or any other reviewer with basic core knowledge on that particular subject should be able to point out any shortcoming, information missed by the author besides pointing out inaccuracies, if any. Point out for whom the book under review will be informative and useful, who should read it and is it worth being on the bookshelf of students, experts in that particular field as well as related libraries. The review should be as comprehensive as possible and not only give enough information about the book to the reader but also attract him/her to buy and read the book. Look at the price whether it is reasonable keeping in view the number of pages, the information it contains, the paper used and the overall quality of printing. At the end of the review do not forget to give information on where the book is available.

One of the important responsibilities of the reviewer is to elucidate whether the claimed/stated purpose of the book writing has been achieved or not. It is expected from the reviewer to clarify how does or does not the author/s meet the claimed objective/s.⁴

Few points keep in mind while reviewing a book

- What does the reader of the review need to be informed?
- What was the purpose of the book?
- Did the authors accomplish that purpose?
- What are the issues it explores and how well does it do this?
- Who is the target audience for the book?
- Are there additional characteristics that improve the understanding of the book, such as catalogs, maps, glossaries, or other resources?
- What makes this book worth reading?
- Discuss what you particularly liked and disliked about the book.
- Give your opinion on the book. Was it interesting? Was it good? Would you recommend it?
- Read and reread your review carefully before sending to the editor.

Characteristics of a good review

A good review has the following characteristics. It should:

- be unprejudiced, balanced and professionally written.
- provide constructive feedback.
- create interest among the prospective readers about the book.
- be written in simple language
- be specific
- not be very long because readers have limited time
- evaluate the book for its overall worth, thesis, and shortcomings if any.

A review provides the readers a view about author/s, purpose, content, and quality.⁴ In the last but not least “review the book in front of you, not the book you wish the author had written.” A reviewer can mention the inadequacies present in the book but avoid appraising the book for not being something it was never envisioned to be.¹²

Example:

Dil Rawan Dawan: This is the story of cardiac surgery in Punjab authored by Col. Prof. Masood Ahmad Cheema who retired as Prof. of Cardiac Surgery from Punjab Institute of Cardiology and later also served as Project Director of CPE Institute of Cardiology at Multan. In this book besides writing about his personal life story and the wish of his father to make him doctor, Col. Cheema has not only traced the history of cardiac surgery in the world but also what problems he and his team had to face when they started developing the department of cardiac surgery at Mayo Hospital Lahore and later at Punjab Institute of Cardiology. He has given due credit to all those from whom he learnt and became an accomplished cardiac surgeon. Not only has that he also appreciated all those from the industry who helped in establishing and promoting cardiac surgery in the province. He also talks about how he failed an attempt by a cardiac surgeon from India to come to the PIC and operate upon

Pakistani patients and humiliate the Pakistani colleagues in view of his anti-Pakistan reputation. He did not forget to remind his colleagues in AFIC of his association with that institution when he was delivering a lecture there and expressed his feelings in between the lines by reciting the following couplet:

کعبے کو ان بُتوں سے بھی نسبت ہے دُور کی
گو واں نہیں پہ واں سے نکالے ہوئے تو ہیں

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