

LANCASTER ARCHAEOLOGICAL AND HISTORICAL SOCIETY

RESEARCH ADVISORY GUIDE 2

Critically reviewing a book or a journal article

This advisory guide is an aid for conducting a review of a book or article, substantially set in a historiographical non-fictional context. Most publishers and editors of journals will have their own guidelines to achieve a consistency of style and presentation for their publications.¹

What they will not do is tell you how to write a review for which there are no set rules, as this will depend on the length, theme and writing style of the book or article (hereafter, collectively referred to as “the Work”) and the opinions of the reviewer. There are however principles and procedures that reviewers will be expected to follow, just as there are when writing a dissertation or thesis, and these are addressed in this guide.

A review is an analysis and critical evaluation to demonstrate the strengths and weaknesses of the Work compared to the state of current knowledge and the views of the subject being discussed by the author. Most importantly, a review is a commentary and not a summary or a restatement of the subject matter. The reviewer constructs an argument which may agree or disagree with the content or purpose of the Work. Where the Work is noteworthy or deficient in its knowledge, judgement, or organisation, this should be mentioned. A review should serve as a recommendation for other readers through the ability of the reviewer to question and challenge the Work with an enquiring mind.

The length of a review will vary depending on the publication in which it is to appear but will rarely exceed 1,000 words and will typically range between 500-750 words. Potential reviewers writing for *Contrebis* for example should seek the advice of the editor on the length of review required if this has not been stipulated in the invitation to contribute a review.

A review has three constituent parts: a Review Analysis, an Evaluation, and a Conclusion.

Review Analysis

It is very important to have a clear strategy or a plan of action for writing a review. This is achieved by adopting a methodical and consistent approach in critically analysing the text before starting to write a succinct and well-supported argument. If this is done uncritically, the assumptions, the rationale, the points the author has made and the intent of the author in writing the Work in the first-place risk being overlooked. Ascertain what the structure of the Work is at the outset to make the reader aware what the review is about. For a book, view the table of contents to understand how the book is organized, and for an article, read the Abstract. Identify what the author’s main ideas are and how they have been developed. The research background of the author may help one to understand the author’s experience and reputation on the subject matter and any other relevant books the author may have written. Analyse the Work in terms of its theme(s), that is, the subject or topics, the author’s ideas and principal points focusing on evidence to support these ideas and points. Consider the validity of the author’s points of view and the purpose for writing the Work. The findings from the Review Analysis will form the first section of the review.

Consider the following issues:

- Prepare a concise summary of the content of the Work.
- Describe the author, the author’s expertise and any books or articles relevant to the Works the author has written.
- Check if the author has provided any information about the text or structure of the book in the preface or introduction.
- What is the main argument of the Work?

- What primary and secondary sources have been used?
- How much of the Work is original and will extend the boundaries of existing knowledge?
- Answer the following questions:
 - Did you like the Work? Why? Why not?
 - What is the author trying to achieve in the Work? Why did the author write it in this way? Consider the quality of writing style such as clarity, originality, and conciseness.
 - What points is the author most concerned to make?
 - What are the strengths and weaknesses of the Work? What does the author fail to do given the framework or objectives set by the author?
 - What has the author accomplished?
 - Did the author's arguments make sense? Were you persuaded by them? Why? Why not?
 - Are the author's ideas, main points and conclusions valid? Does the author cover the subject adequately in a balanced way supported by evidence?
 - Who is the intended readership? Is the author's writing style intelligible to the intended audience?

Evaluation

A book and a journal article are written with a specific purpose in mind within a defined framework or number of stated objectives in a historiographical context. As a reviewer it is important to question and challenge the assumptions, the rationale, the points the author has made and the purpose or intent of the author in writing the Work. Discuss what has previously been written about the subject and what issues have been identified by other commentators. Keep this discussion brief so that the Work under review remains the focus. The key is to evaluate the current context of, and approach to, the subject or topic that you are commenting on to allow a balanced but rigorous assessment to be made based on supporting evidence while avoiding any bias. The content and structure of the Evaluation will comprise the largest part of the review on the Work.

Consider the following issues:

- What are the existing theories about the subject or topic? What are the influential and important publications on the subject or topic?
- How will you provide a learned context to your critical review? Consider dividing your commentary into themes in paragraphs to support your understanding addressed in an orderly and logical manner that readers can follow.
- Evaluate the Work for its interest, accuracy, objectivity, importance, and usefulness.
- Are there inconsistencies, gaps or other shortcomings in the author's knowledge and understanding? What aspects need to be further tested? This will allow you to demonstrate a gap or a contradiction which your critique can identify and explain.
- What contribution will your critique make?
- Only concentrate on the most important issues in the Work. You will not be able to cover all the points made by the author.
- A competent and analytical critical review will demonstrate that the reviewer has an informed understanding of the issues being discussed.
- Avoid providing lists or descriptions of individual issues without linking them and discussing them in a wider context.

- Avoid repeating what is already in the Work without linking your comments to a specific point or issue.
- Critically comment using your understanding of the subject or topic to demonstrate the strengths and weaknesses of the Work to consolidate your evaluation. How well has it met its objectives? Are there opportunities to present an alternative viewpoint or response?

Conclusion

Conclude with a concise summary of what the Work is about and your opinions as a reviewer. Do not introduce new evidence for your argument in the conclusion.

Michael Haslam

Lancaster Archaeological and Historical Society

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References

1. See '*Guidelines for Contributors*' on the LAHS website at <https://lahs.archaeologyuk.org> under 'Contents' and 'Contributors'

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