

# How to write a book memo

This handout is based on these websites:

The writing center. The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

<http://writingcenter.unc.edu/resources/handouts-demos/specific-writing-assignments/book-reviews>

Writing book reviews. University of Waterloo/

<http://www.lib.uwaterloo.ca/libguides/1-12.html>

Writing book reviews. Indiana University

[http://www.indiana.edu/~wts/pamphlets/book\\_reviews.shtml](http://www.indiana.edu/~wts/pamphlets/book_reviews.shtml)

## What is a book memo?

A book memo is a review, i.e. a critical evaluation of the book. Above all, a review makes an argument: **it is a commentary, not merely a summary.**

**Warnings: Do not write a summary-style high-school “book report” just to show you read and understood the book! Take a systematic, analytical approach to the text.**

Be very careful to avoid plagiarism. Do not use words or ideas from the Internet or from any publication without citing the source. Also, if you use more than three words in a row from any source, including the book you’re writing about, those words must be enclosed in quotation marks.

**The review should be 5 to 7 pages long (1500 to 2500 words).**

## Reading the book

Read the whole book thoroughly and carefully. Reread what you don't understand. Don't skip forewords, prefaces, and other parts that may not appear integral to the text. What you learn here might help you to understand the book better. If possible, it's best to read the book twice, the first time to get an overview, the second time to test your impressions and gather detailed evidence.

Take notes as you read. Taking notes also helps you stay alert as you read, and gives you the opportunity to mark effective passages for quoting.

### ***Question to ask as you read:***

- What approach does the author take to the subject? What is the thesis—or main argument—of the book? If the author wanted you to get one idea from the book, what would it be?
- What are the author's assumptions? Does the author cover all aspects of the subject in a balanced fashion?
- What methodology is used? What are the author's primary sources? How comprehensive is the research?

- How is the book structured? Is its development orderly and logical? Is it clear?
- Does the book have illustrations? An index? Bibliography? What other features does it have? Are they effective and useful?
- How appropriate is the book's title? Does it promise essentially what the book delivers?
- Why was the book written? Has the author met these objectives?
- How does the author support their argument? What evidence does he/she use to prove their point? Do you find that evidence convincing? Why or why not? Does any of the author's information (or conclusions) conflict with other books you've read, courses you've taken or just previous assumptions you had of the subject?
- How does the author structure their argument? What are the parts that make up the whole? Does the argument make sense? Does it persuade you? Why or why not?
- How has this book helped you understand the subject?

Beyond the internal workings of the book, you may also consider some information about the author and the circumstances of the text's production:

Who is the author? Nationality, political persuasion, training, intellectual interests, personal history, and historical context may provide crucial details about how a work takes shape.

What credentials or background does the author have that qualify him or her to write the book? Has the author written other books or papers on this topic? Do others in this field consider this author to be an expert?

Once you are able to answer all these questions, you are ready to write your review! Answers to these questions will actually build the center of your paper. You just need to reorganize them in a more structured way.

## **Writing the memo**

Once you have made your observations and assessments of the work under review, carefully survey your notes and attempt to unify your impressions into a statement that will describe the purpose or thesis of your review. Then, outline the arguments that support your thesis.

Your arguments should develop the thesis in a logical manner. That logic, unlike more standard academic writing, may initially emphasize the author's argument while you develop your own in the course of the review.

Writing a book review is much like writing any other short essay. There is no universal formula, but following a few basic guidelines can simplify the task. What follows is just one of many ways to organize a review.

### ***Introduction***

Like most pieces of writing, the review itself usually begins with an introduction that lets your readers know what the review will say. The first paragraph usually includes the name of the author, the book title and the main theme. You should also include relevant details about who the author is and where he/she stands in the genre or field of inquiry. You could also link the title to the subject to show how the title explains the subject matter.

You can add a very brief overview of the contents of the book, the purpose or audience for the book and –if relevant – its political/historical context.

### ***Methodology, thesis of the book, summary of content***

You can first present the methodology of the author and the kind of data he/she relies on. For example, if the book is based on a field research, you should explain why the author chose it, and discuss the possibilities and the limits entailed by this method.

Next, you should give a summary of the main points of the book, quoting and paraphrasing key phrases from the author.

Be careful to introduce and define the main sociological concepts presented in the book.

NB : Avoid excessive quotation and give a specific page reference in parentheses when you do quote. Remember that you can state many of the author's points in your own words.

This should not be too long, as analysis takes priority. In the course of making your assessment, you'll hopefully be backing up your assertions with concrete evidence from the book, so some summary will be dispersed throughout other parts of the review.

### ***Analysis and evaluation of the book***

Your analysis and evaluation should be organized into paragraphs that deal with single aspects of your argument (one paragraph = one idea). This arrangement can be challenging when your purpose is to consider the book as a whole, but it can help you differentiate elements of your criticism and pair assertions with evidence more clearly.

**You do not necessarily need to work chronologically through the book as you discuss it.** Given the argument you want to make, you can organize your paragraphs more usefully by themes, methods, or other elements of the book.

### ***Conclusion***

Sum up or restate your thesis or make the final judgment regarding the book. You should not introduce new evidence for your argument in the conclusion. You can, however, introduce new ideas that go beyond the book if they extend the logic of your own thesis.

You can describe your reactions to book: what strikes you as noteworthy, whether or not it was effective or persuasive, and how it enhanced your understanding of the issues at hand. But remember: review the book in front of you, not the book you wish the author had written. You can and should point out shortcomings or failures, but don't criticize the book for not being something it was never intended to be.