

Writing the Academic Book Review by Wendy Laura Belcher

Why Write a Book Review?

Writing book reviews is not only the easiest and quickest route to publication, it is a good way to improve your writing skills, develop your analytical skills, learn how the journal publishing process works, and get to know editors. Since some libraries can't buy books unless they have been reviewed and many individuals won't buy books unless they have read a review, reviewing books can definitely advance your field. Indeed, scholars in smaller fields sometimes get together and assign books for review so that every book published in their field is reviewed somewhere. Just remember that book reviews do not "count" as much on a curriculum vitae as an academic essay. If you are doing more than two book reviews a year, you may be spending too much time on book reviews and not enough on your other writing.

Choosing a Book

Think about what kind of book would be most useful to you in writing your dissertation, finalizing a paper for publication, or passing your exams. Since book reviews do take time, like any writing, it is best to choose a book that will work for you twice, as a publication and as research. Alternatively, some recommend that graduate students focus on reviewing textbooks or anthologies, since such reviews take less background knowledge and editors can find it difficult to find people willing to do such reviews. Although the traditional book review is of one book, editors will often welcome book reviews that address two or more related books.

Choose a book that (1) is in your field, (2) is on a topic for which you have sound background knowledge, (3) has been published in the past two or three years, and (4) has been published by a reputable publisher (i.e., any press affiliated with a university, or large commercial presses).

Books on hot topics are often of special interest to editors. It can also be rewarding to pick an obscure but useful book in order to bring attention to it. To avoid complications, it is best not to review books written by your advisor, spouse, or ex.

To identify a suitable book in your field:

- Look up the call number of the favorite book in your field and go to the stacks of your university library. Do a shelf search around the call number to see if anything similar or related has been published in the past couple of years.
- Go to any book database—your university library on-line, Amazon.com, the Library of Congress—and search using two or three keywords related to your field (e.g., Chicano fiction, Chicana politics, Latino demographics, Latina high school education) to find books in your area.
- Read magazines that review books before publication—such as *Choice*, *Library Journal*, or *Kirkus Reviews*—to get a sense for interesting books that will be coming out. You can get copies of books for review before they are published. Editors especially like reviews of just published books.
- Read those academic journals that list books recently received for review or recently published in their area. (*Aztlán* will have such a section starting in fall 2003.)
- Ask faculty members in your department for recommendations.

Once you have identified several books, locate copies and skim them. Pick the book that seems the strongest. Do not pick a book that has major problems or with which you disagree violently.

As a graduate student, you do not have the protection of tenure and may one day be evaluated by the person whose book you put to the ax. If you really feel strongly that you must write a negative review of a certain book, go ahead and write the review. Academia is, after all, quite oedipal and young scholars do sometimes make their reputations by deflating those who came before them. Just realize that going on record in such a public way may have consequences.

Choosing a Journal

Identify several leading journals in your field that publish book reviews. One way to do this is to search an on-line article database. Using several key words from your field, limit your search to book reviews and note the journals where the results were published.

Before starting to write your review, contact the book review editor of one of the journals. This is important standard practice; most journals do not accept unsolicited reviews. You do not want to write an entire review of a book and send it to a journal, only to be told that a review of that very book is to appear in the next issue.

Just send a short e-mail to the book review editor (most journals have websites with such information) identifying the book you would like to review and your qualifications for reviewing it. This e-mail need not be longer than two sentences: "I am writing to find out if you would welcome a review from me of *[Book Title]*, edited by [editor] and published in 2012 by [publisher]. I am currently writing my dissertation at Stanford on the history of the field of [name of a field related to book]."

Another reason why you want to contact the book review editor is that they often can get you the book for free. Publishers frequently send books for review straight to journals or, if the book editor directly contacts them, straight to you. Of course, you don't need to wait for the book to start your review if you have access to a library copy. If you get a free book, make sure to write the review. A book review editor will never send you another book if you don't deliver on the first.

If the book review editor says yes, they would like a review of the book from you, make sure to ask if the journal has any book review submission guidelines. In particular, you want to make sure you understand how long their book reviews tend to be. If the book review editor says the book is already under review, move on to your next journal choice or ask the editor if they have any books on the topic that they would like reviewed. You are under no obligation to review a book they suggest, just make sure to get back to them with a decision. It is perfectly acceptable to say "Thanks for the suggestion, I've decided to focus on writing my prospectus/dissertation."

Reading the Book

It is best, when writing a book review, to be an active reader of the book. Sit at a desk with pen and paper in hand. As you read, stop frequently to summarize the argument, to note particularly clear statements of the book's argument or purpose, and to describe your own responses. If you have read in this active way, putting together the book review should be quick and straightforward. Some people prefer to read at the computer but if you're a good typist, you often start typing up long quotes from the book instead of analyzing it. Paper and pen provides a little friction to prevent such drifting.

Take particular note of the title (does the book deliver what the title suggests it is going to deliver?), the table of contents (does the book cover all the ground you think it should?), the preface (often the richest source of information about the book), and the index (is it accurate, broad, deep?).

Some questions to keep in mind as you are reading:

- What is the book's argument?
- Does the book do what it says it is going to do?
- Is the book a contribution to the field or discipline?
- Does the book relate to a current debate or trend in the field and if so, how?
- What is the theoretical lineage or school of thought out of which the book rises?
- Is the book well-written?
- What are the book's terms and are they defined?
- How accurate is the information (e.g., the footnotes, bibliography, dates)?
- Are the illustrations helpful? If there are no illustrations, should there have been?
- Who would benefit from reading this book?
- How does the book compare to other books in the field?
- If it is a textbook, what courses can it be used in and how clear is the book's structure and examples?

It can be worthwhile to do an on-line search to get a sense for the author's history, other books, university appointments, graduate advisor, and so on. This can provide you with useful context..

Making a Plan

Book reviews are usually 600 to 2,000 words in length. It is best to aim for about 1,000 words, as you can say a fair amount in 1,000 words without getting bogged down. There's no point in making a book review into a 20-page masterpiece since the time would have been better spent on an academic essay that would count for more on your c.v. Some say a review should be written in a month: two weeks reading the book, one week planning your review, and one week writing it. Although many don't write an outline for an essay, you should really try to outline your book review before you write it. This will keep you on task and stop you from straying into writing an academic essay.

Classic book review structure is as follows:

- Title including complete bibliographic citation for the work (i.e., title in full, author, place, publisher, date of publication, edition statement, pages, special features [maps, color plates, etc.], price, and ISBN.
- One paragraph identifying the thesis, and whether the author achieves the stated purpose of the book.
- One or two paragraphs summarizing the book.
- One paragraph on the book's strengths.
- One paragraph on the book's weaknesses.
- One paragraph on your assessment of the book's strengths and weaknesses.

Writing the Review

Once you've read the book, try to spend no more than one or two weeks writing the review. Allowing a great deal of time to fall between reading the book and writing about it is unfair to

you and the author. The point of writing something short like a book review is to do it quickly. Sending a publication to a journal is always scary, sitting on the review won't make it less so.

Avoiding Five Common Pitfalls

1. Evaluate the text, don't just summarize it. While a succinct restatement of the text's points is important, part of writing a book review is making a judgment. Is the book a contribution to the field? Does it add to our knowledge? Should this book be read and by whom? One needn't be negative to evaluate; for instance, explaining how a text relates to current debates in the field is a form of evaluation.
2. Do not cover everything in the book. In other words, don't use the table of contents as a structuring principle for your review. Try to organize your review around the book's argument or your argument about the book.
3. Judge the book by its intentions not yours. Don't criticize the author for failing to write the book you think that he or she should have written. As John Updike puts it, "Do not imagine yourself the caretaker of any tradition, an enforcer of any party standards, a warrior in any ideological battle, a corrections officer of any kind."
4. Likewise, don't spend too much time focusing on gaps. Since a book is only 200 to 500 pages, it cannot possibly address the richness of any topic. For this reason, the most common criticism in any review is that the book doesn't address some part of the topic. If the book purports to be about ethnicity and film and yet lacks a chapter on Latinos, by all means, mention it. Just don't belabor the point. Another tic of reviewers is to focus too much on books the author did not cite. If you are using their bibliography just to display your own knowledge it will be obvious to the reader. Keep such criticisms brief.
5. Don't use too many quotes from the book. It is best to paraphrase or use short telling quotes within sentences.

Other

For further advice about writing for publication, see *Writing Your Journal Article in Twelve Weeks: A Guide to Academic Publishing Success* by Wendy Laura Belcher (Sage, 2009).

This article was originally written to aid participants in a workshop sponsored by the UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center and to encourage book review submissions to *Aztlán: A Journal of Chicano Studies*. Book reviews in the field of Chicano studies can be sent to David O'Grady, Assistant Editor of *Aztlán*, whose contact can be found at www.chicano.ucla.edu/press.