



# How to Write a Book Review

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A book review is not a summary, and it's not merely a Siskel and Ebert thumbs-up or thumbs-down personal appraisal of the book. The purpose of the book review is to present your readers with a critical evaluation of the book. It's subjective – yes -- but it needs to take into consideration the work's literary merits in order to arrive at the personal assessment.

The book review is usually composed of the following components:

## **Overview of the Book**

Usually present in the first paragraph of the review and brief, the overview can consider the author's purpose and the theme of the book and give the reader of the review an idea at how well the book fulfilled its purpose or conveyed its theme.

Was the book intended to entertain? Did it? What is a central theme or important idea of the book and how did the author convey it? Were characters used to convey theme? Are there recurrent images that help to illustrate it? What events take place that serve this purpose? And was it effective?

## **Assessing the Book's Strength and Weaknesses**

Pay attention to the book's narrative voice.

Who is the narrator? Is (s)he appropriate and effective? Are the characters believable and fully created? Are they sympathetic? Is the use of language and wording appropriate to the book's genre, and does it support the purpose of the book?

Questions such as these and others (readability, style, scope, etc...) can help you decide how the book compares to other books in the same genre. This will inform your final opinion of the book.

## **Author Information**

Some biographical information about the author may be of interest. Is the book a novel of place? If so where is the author from or where does (s)he live? What are the author's previous works? How does his or her life experience feed the writing of this book?

## **Your Personal Perspective**

Perhaps in combination with author information, your personal take on the work is often used to sum up your earlier critical analysis. Avoid overusing "I" statements to mitigate your views. A reader approaches the book review knowing that it is subjective. Also, go easy on the superlatives (Best book ever! Greatest characters!).

Remember, the review is a tool for your readers, not a showcase for the breadth of your literary acumen. Consider your audience and go easy on the jargon. I try to approach each review as a form of personal essay that illuminates my response and relationship to the work being reviewed. This affords me a measure of creativity that makes the book review a lot more fun to write... and to read.

## Introduction

Write a strong paragraph that states the book's title (underlined or italicized), genre, author's name, and publication information. Also give a brief statement about the book's angle or message.

## Body

Before you get started on the body of the report, take a few minutes to jot down some helpful information by considering the following points.

Did you enjoy the book?

Was it well written?

If it was a fictional work, list the characters.

If it was a work of non-fiction, identify the writer's thesis.

What is the writing style?

Is this book a part of a series?

In the body of your book report, you will write an extended summary of the book, while weaving some of the points above through your remarks. For example, you could say:

*"This book, the third in a series, offers insight to the bizarre childhood of Bethany Robbins, the main character. The author describes how Bethany developed a friendship with a skunk that lived in the woods behind her house. Alfred, the skunk, explains to Bethany the pitfalls of bathing too frequently."*

The list of points should provide enough material for writing several paragraphs as you summarize. As you lead to your final paragraph, consider some additional impressions and opinions:

Was the ending satisfactory (for fiction)?

Was the thesis supported by strong evidence (for non-fiction)?

What interesting or notable facts do you know about the author?

Would you recommend this book?

## Conclusion

Conclude your report with a paragraph or two that covers these additional points. Some teachers prefer that you restate the name and author of the book in the concluding paragraph. As always, consult your specific assignment guide. Unless instructed otherwise, your final last sentence should offer a one-sentence summary with your overall opinion, as in the following example.

*"The author provided an intriguing and entertaining glimpse into the mind of a girl who learned about life through the words, real or imagined, of her wild but wise friends from the forest."*

## How to Write a Book Report in 10 Steps

A book report should contain the basic elements, it's true. But a good book report will address a specific question or point of view and back up this topic with specific examples, in the form of symbols and themes. These steps will help you identify and incorporate those important elements.

1. **Have an objective in mind, if possible.** Your objective is the point of view you want to convey, the point you want to argue, or the question you plan to answer. Sometimes your teacher will offer a question for you to answer in your paper, which makes this step easy. If you have to come up with your own theme, you may have to wait and develop the objective while reading and reflecting on the book.

2. **Keep supplies on hand when you read.** This is *very* important. Keep sticky-note flags, pen, and paper nearby as you read. Don't try to take "mental notes." It just doesn't work.
3. **Read the book.** As you read, keep an eye out for emotional flags. These can be anything from a symbol to an entire scene--anything that evokes emotion. These will indicate some important theme or point. For instance, a spot of blood on the floor, a quick glance, a nervous habit, an impulsive action--these are worth noting.
4. **Use your sticky flags to mark pages.** When you run into any of the emotion flags, mark the page by placing the sticky note at the beginning of the relevant line. Mark everything that piques your interest, even if you don't understand their relevance.
5. **Note possible themes or patterns.** As you read and record emotional flags or signs, you will begin to see a point or a pattern. On a note pad, write down possible themes or issues. If your assignment is to answer a question, you will record how symbols address that question.
6. **Label your sticky flags.** If you see a symbol repeated several times, you should indicate this somehow on the sticky flags, for easy reference later. For instance, if blood shows up in several scenes, write a "b" on the relevant flags for blood. This may become your major book theme, so you'll want to navigate between the relevant pages easily.
7. **Develop a rough outline.** By the time you finish reading the book you will have recorded several possible themes or approaches to your objective. Review your notes and try to determine which view or claim you can back up with good examples (symbols). You may need to play with a few sample outlines to pick the best approach.
8. **Develop paragraph ideas.** Each paragraph should have a topic sentence and a sentence that transitions to the next paragraph. Try writing these first, then filling out the paragraphs with your examples (symbols). Don't forget to include the basics for every book report in your first paragraph or two.
9. **Review, re-arrange, repeat.** At first, your paragraphs are going to look like ugly ducklings. They will be clunky, awkward, and unattractive in their early stages. Read them over, re-arrange and replace sentences that don't quite fit. Then review and repeat until the paragraphs flow.
10. **Re-visit your introductory paragraph.** The introductory paragraph will make the critical first impression for your paper. It should be great. Be sure it is well-written, interesting, and it contains a strong thesis sentence.

### Tips:

1. **The objective.** Sometimes it is possible to have a clear objective (question or theme) in mind before you start. Sometimes, it is not. If you have to come up with your own theme, don't stress about a clear objective in the beginning. It will come later.
2. **Recording emotional flags:** Emotional flags are merely points in the book that bring about emotion. Sometimes, the smaller the better. For example, for an assignment for *The Red Badge of Courage*, the teacher might ask students to address whether they believe Henry, the main character, is a hero. In this book, Henry sees lots of blood (emotional symbol) and death (emotional symbol) and this causes him to run away from battle at first (emotional response). He is ashamed (emotion).
3. **Book report basics.** In your first paragraph or two, you should include the book setting, time period, characters, and your thesis statement (objective).
4. **Re-visiting the introductory paragraph:** The introductory paragraph should be the last paragraph you complete. It should be mistake-free and interesting. It should also contain a clear thesis. Don't write a thesis early on in the process and forget about it. Your point of view or argument may change completely as you re-arrange your paragraph sentences. Always check your thesis sentence last.

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