

Dr. Archuleta
On Writing Book Reviews

Book reviews should help potential readers discern whether the book will be of use to their research. This means that the reviewer needs to offer information as to what the book is about (what topics it covers), what form(s) its primary thesis (or theses), how well its major positions are executed, and how thoroughly the author knows existing research (not necessarily in that order, of course). In other words, book reviews should be both informative and evaluative, because they provide a critical analysis of someone's work. By "critical," I don't mean "negative." I mean "judiciously evaluative." If you do find fault, make sure you phrase it in scholarly and evaluative language, so that you sound judicious rather than carping in tone.

Scholarly book reviews, if published in journals, usually follow certain formulae associated with that journal's practices. Typically, a good book review will fulfill certain key areas in inquiry. It will: 1) summarize the book and relate the author's main point or series of points (the thesis of the book); 2) identify the key areas of evidence the author uses and examine how (the method by which) the author uses evidence in support of the thesis; 3) consider the author's "position" (the author's background, viewpoint, or ideological positioning) about the materials, in an effort to examine whether the materials have received fair representation; and 4) compare the work to existing scholarly work in the field.

Most reviews for most journals are written in lengths specified by word count. Usually, reviews range from about 600 to about 1,000 words, though some journals ask for reviews of 250 words, and some journals allow for reviews of up to 1,500 words. Some journals give greater review space to certain kinds of books: Resources for American Literary Study offers full-length reviews of editions; American Literature rarely offers reviews of editions.

Typically, book review editors of journals contact potential reviewers. One doesn't just select a book, write the review, and send it, unsolicited, to a journal. Instead, one writes a review when one has been asked to do so, and after the book for review has arrived. The "payment" is that one keeps the book reviewed.

For this assignment, go to journals that publish articles in this field and find some reviews of books in the field. Read several reviews from several types of journals until you feel comfortable with the genre. Find the journal that carries reviews like the one you would like to write. Determine the general length (by word count) of reviews in that journal. Then, find a book that interests you, and write your review!

Journals you might examine include: Studies in American Indian Literature, American Indian Quarterly, American Indian Culture and Research Journal, Wicazo Sa Review, Ayaangwaamizin: International Journal of Indigenous Philosophy, Indigenous Nations Studies, American Quarterly, American Literary History, MELUS. These are just suggestions; you might have another favorite.

In preparing your review to turn in, provide a word count for your review and tell me the journal for which you have written your review. Make sure you have the appropriate review information in the heading of your review. That is, check out how a book is identified at the start of the review and then follow that model when writing your review.