

Book reviews

Book reviews play an important part in academic communication. Most academic journals publish book reviews in addition to their articles and, indeed, some journals publish nothing but book reviews.

Book reviews are a special form of academic writing. They have well-known structures with familiar components. When writing book reviews, colleagues use a variety of phrases that carry hidden meanings (see Table 3.7.1).

Book reviews differ from academic articles submitted for publication because, in the main, they are solicited by an editor and are not subject to the normal refereeing process. Editors normally accept for publication the reviews that are submitted (although they may sometimes shorten them).

CHOOSING THE REVIEWERS

Different editors have different procedures for choosing book reviewers. Some, for example, maintain panels of authors deemed appropriate for the task, whereas others work more with their personal knowledge of authors in their field, perhaps guided by recommendations from colleagues.

Today, there are several journals where the editors do not personally select individual authors to review a particular book. Here, lists of books received for review are distributed by email attachments to a panel of reviewers and/or readers, who can then select any that interest them (e.g. *PsycCRITIQUES*, *British Journal of Educational Technology*). Completed book reviews are submitted by email or downloaded directly using electronic editing software. One or two journals provide electronic templates for their reviewers to follow when writing their reviews (e.g. *International Journal of Commerce and Management*).

WRITING BOOK REVIEWS: EDITORIAL INSTRUCTIONS

Because book reviews are not normally refereed, editors need to make clear what they require. Thus, there are usually instructions on these matters for

Table 3.7.1 The hidden meanings of phrases in book reviews

'This is a surprising book'

This is better than expected

'A mixed bag'

Not much in this but one or two chapters worth thinking about

'A useful book for the library'

Not very exciting

'The discussion is somewhat abstruse'

I could not understand much of this

'For the most part this is a thorough, lucid and well-argued book but a few weaknesses can be noted. First ...'

That's done the praise bit, now let's get down to the criticisms

'In my view more scholarly references would be better for the readers of this text than the par-boiled information referred to on web sites'

This is a light weight text and/or

My scholarship is superior to that of the authors

'The author has presented opposing views fairly, although instances of bias are detectable by the omission of some critical references'

He has left out my key paper on ...

'This is a useful account of unastonishing work'

Oh dear ...

(Last sentence) 'The authors' position leads them to omit key research and to propose work that is complex and interesting but which will not improve the education of children'

Ouch!

Bressler (1999) comments: 'The reviewer is able to compress complex ideas into a snappy 600 words and to substitute veiled allusion for systematic argument because he can trust his readers to decipher the message'. (p. 709)

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potential book reviewers. Such instructions typically cover technical matters, and content.

Guidance on technical matters

These instructions often start with an indication of the required length: 'Individual book reviews should be between 800 and 1,200 words in length, depending upon the amount of attention which you feel the book merits'. Indeed, advice about length is sometimes the only advice given.

There may, however, be further advice on layout: 'Reviews should be set justified and double-spaced'. In some journals a good deal of attention is

given to how to head the review in the appropriate format for that particular journal (e.g. author – surname first – date of publication, title – in bold, place of publication, publisher, number of pages, ISBN number, price). Similarly, there are sometimes instructions on how to end the review, with the reviewer's name and institutional affiliation, and perhaps a request for some biographical notes.

Much space is devoted in some editorial instructions on to how cite quotations from the book being reviewed, and on how to provide references and/or footnotes. However, some journals explicitly forbid such details: 'Please use references only sparingly, if at all' (*The Psychologist*). Finally, there are instructions for submitting the finished review: for example 'Please send your review by 6th August to meet the November deadline.'

Guidance on content

Some journals provide more advice. The *Journal of the Medical Library Association*, for example, provides potential book reviewers with lengthy notes on the aims and scope of the journal, together with a paragraph on what the content of the review might contain:

Reviews should contain a brief overview of the scope and content [of the book being reviewed] so that readers can determine the book's interest to them. Reviewing each chapter of a book is not necessary. For a research or historical work, please comment on its significance in relation to the focus area as well as to the field as a whole. For an applied or descriptive work, be sure to comment on its usefulness. In both cases compare the book with similar publications in its area and indicate its potential audiences, where relevant.

Other journals go further, for example:

The editor encourages reviewers to devote special attention to the political assumptions and discussions in the book under review.

(Law and Politics Book Review)

There are also – sometimes – suggestions about style:

We are seeking reviews that are incisive . . . integrative . . . balanced . . . and provocative.

(PsyscCRITIQUES)

It is not required that every review contain at least one negative remark. Selective detail is refreshing. Encyclopaedic detail – as in a chapter by chapter outline – is rarely called for.

(American Journal of Physics)

One or two journals remark on the possibility that a reviewer, having examined a book, may not wish to review it. Such books should be returned for re-assignment. Others comment on ethical matters:

Professional ethics require that you do not review a book when an overriding sense of personal obligation, competition or enmity exists.

(Law and Politics Book Review)

Nature requires its book reviewers to sign certain disclaimers (e.g. that they have not been in dispute with the book's author) before their review can be published.

Unsolicited book reviews

Some editors accept unsolicited reviews, provided that they meet the required standards. As one editor put it:

I strongly encourage unsolicited reviews.

(Journal of Technical Writing and Communication)

Others are more cautious, for example:

This journal does not publish unsolicited reviews. However, if you would like to be added to our database of potential reviewers, please fill in our potential reviewers data-sheet.

(The Hispanic American Historical Review)

Some editors are more blunt:

Unsolicited book reviews are not accepted.

(American Historical Review)

READING AND WRITING BOOK REVIEWS

In a recent study, I reported on my findings when I sent out an electronic questionnaire on reading and writing book reviews to groups of academics in the arts, sciences and social sciences (Hartley, 2006).

Approximately fifty people in each of these groups replied. Almost two-thirds of them recalled reading a dreadful book review. Some of the things they said about such reviews were that they were:

- pointless, uninformative, indecisive and boring
- a mere listing of the contents

- pretentious, unkind and careless
- personally abusive about the author's credentials
- written to cherish the reviewer's ego.

Generally speaking, book reviews were not highly regarded if they simply outlined the content of a book using a chapter by chapter format.

On the other hand, approximately half of the respondents recalled reading an outstanding book review. Here they thought that such reviews:

- gave a balanced, critical evaluation of the text
- made seemingly dull topics interesting
- were well written, succinct and informative
- made theoretical contributions in their own right
- made people want to buy the book.

In a wide-ranging and informative paper, Miranda (1996) suggests that the key features of successful reviews are that the reviewer:

- evaluates the contribution of the text
- sets the work in a larger, broader context
- identifies the strengths and weaknesses of the arguments
- involves the reader in the discussion.

Miranda also notes that some book review formats are not used as extensively as they might be. She distinguishes between *integrated formats*, where there are several reviews on books on the same subject matter; *multidisciplinary format*, where one book is reviewed by people from different disciplines; *special issue formats*, where the reviews supplement and complement the theme of selected papers in that issue of the journal; *review essay sections*, where two or three books on the same or contrasting themes are reviewed by the same reviewer; and *rejoinders*, where a review is followed by the author's reply. All of these formats seem worth exploring more.

How then do authors write book reviews? Respondents to my questionnaire were reluctant to commit themselves. Most argued that it depended on the book in question. One, however, wrote: 'I use a basic sort of "recipe" that touches on all the information that I think readers of book reviews need'.

Two stages appear to be required. First of all, there is the preliminary reading and thinking about the book. Sometimes this is done before starting on the review, but some reviewers start making notes from the outset. At this stage, reviewers are concerned with selecting and thinking about information that will be relevant to the task. This might involve a trip to the library or to particular web sites to check up on required information.

Next comes the actual writing of the review. Here, different writers have different preferences. The quotations given in Figure 3.7.1 provide but two examples.

'I usually read completely the books I am reviewing (so as to be sure that I do not misunderstand them), marking parts that I think are particularly meaningful. Then I start by saying what the book is about and the intended audience (since having this information first may allow readers who are not interested to skip the rest of the review, and readers who are interested to raise their attention). Next I outline how the topic is developed, as concerns facets of content and depth of treatment. Then I point out what are in my opinion the points of strengths and weaknesses of the book. Finally, I try to give a global evaluation of my appreciation and possible usefulness of the book. Finally I polish the form and try to bring it to the required length. This writing phase lasts usually around two hours'.

'I read the book through, marking on it possible points for inclusion on (i) what the author says the book is about, (ii) possible key findings, and (iii) controversial statements. I then decide on which of these to include and which bits of the book to write about and what to leave out (because of space limitations). I word-process the first draft, which is usually too long, and then I cut it and continually refine it through numerous editings – with periods for incubation between each one – until it emerges, in my view, as a highly polished piece of prose!'

Figure 3.7.1 Examples of how academics write book reviews.

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Whatever the procedure, it is important that a book review contains a number of key features. Figure 3.7.2 provides a checklist that might prove useful in this respect.

Make sure that your review contains:

- An early paragraph saying what the book is about, and putting it in context
- Information about the intended audience
- A critique of the argument/content of the book
- Any supporting academic references
- Remarks on the strengths and limitations of the book
- A note on the format, length and price (or value for money)
- A note (if appropriate) on how well the text is supported by tables/diagrams/illustrations

If the following details are not supplied for you, please make sure that your review contains:

- Accurate details of the authors'/editors' names and initials
- Title of the publication
- Edition
- Date of publication
- Publisher and place of publication
- ISBN number
- Format (hardback, paperback or soft cover)
- Number of pages
- Price

Figure 3.7.2 A checklist for book reviewers.

From Hartley (2006), p. 1205. Reprinted with permission of John Wiley & Sons, Inc. © James Hartley, 2006.

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Letters to the editor

Sometimes it strikes you, when reading a recently published paper, that the authors have failed to include some important variable, made a statistical error or omitted a key research finding. One way of responding to this is to write a letter to the editor, or a short note for publication.

Letters to the editor typically follow the following format or ‘moves’ (Magnet and Carnet, 2006). They:

- start with ‘Sir/Madam’
- remind the reader of the contents of the paper to be commented on
- raise the explicit criticism
- give evidence for the criticism
- urge colleagues not to take at face value the specific point made in the earlier paper.

Although not real letters in the accepted sense, letters to the editor are typically written in the first person. They are more likely to use disparaging terms to belittle the point made in the paper to which they are responding (e.g. *poorly conceived, mistaken, not well thought out, inappropriate, unsupported*, etc.) and ‘boosters’ to strengthen their own position (e.g. *show clearly, demonstrate, confirm the fact that*, etc.) (Hyland, 2004).

According to Magnet and Carnet (2006), letters to the editor are not refereed, have a higher acceptance rate, and are usually published more quickly than are original articles, but this is in medicine. In my own experience, I have found that most, if not all, of the letters that I have written have been politely received, even welcomed, but not published for one reason or another (e.g. ‘insufficient space’, ‘the matter is in hand’, etc.).

Figure 3.8.1 provides an example of one of my letters to an editor. Needless to say it was not published.

Magnet and Carnet maintain that, although such letters may seem to serve as a device for writers to let off steam, they play an important part in scientific communication. They argue that such letters can suggest ways of redirecting research, indicate new paths to explore and foster future

Dear Sir,

Confusion in the sub-headings of structured abstracts

Structured abstracts for articles in medical journals typically use five sub-headings: 'Background', 'Aim', 'Method', 'Results' and 'Conclusions' (1). The authors of articles written for XXXX, however, are not required to specify the 'Aim' of their studies, but simply to give the 'Background' (2). However, I maintain that the five sub-headings are better than the four you recommend because the single heading 'Background' does not help authors to distinguish between the background to a study ('Previous research has suggested . . .') and the question under current investigation ('The aim of this study was to . . .').

I demonstrated this elsewhere when I examined the contents under the sub-heading 'Background' for 100 articles in the *British Journal of Psychiatry* (3). Here 37% of the articles gave the background alone, 26% gave the aims alone, and 37% gave both the background and the aims.

It is too early yet to examine many abstracts written under the 2006 rubric for XXXX. But if one examines on the XXXX Website the abstracts for the articles published in June 2006, 17 used five or more sub-headings, 15 used four, 1 used three, and 7 were unstructured. For the 15 abstracts with four sub-headings, 6 used the heading 'Study Objective(s)', 4 'Objective(s)', 3 'Background', 1 'Background and Study Objectives' and 1, 'Introduction'.

The data show that there is confusion over the wording and the contents of structured abstracts in XXXX. Greater clarity can be achieved by requiring five sub-headings so that authors have to indicate separately both the background and the aim of their papers.

- 1 Hartley J. Clarifying the abstracts of systematic literature reviews. *Bull.Med.Libr. Assoc.* 2 000; 84: 332–336.
- 2 Instruction to authors. Downloaded from XXXX website on 14 June 2006.
- 3 Hartley J. Headings in structured abstracts. *Brit.J.Psychiat.* 1998; 173: 178.

Figure 3.8.1 An example of a letter to an editor.

collaborations. Not everyone would agree, however. Horton (2002), for instance, traced the effects of critical letters to the *Lancet* on three topics. Each of these had attracted twelve or more critical letters to the editor. Horton noted that, in the original authors' replies, more than half of the criticisms went unanswered, and that important weaknesses detected in the letters were ignored in subsequently published practice guidelines . . .

SHORT NOTES

Another genre for responding to previous research is the 'short note'. Such notes may be less disparaging than the letter to the editor and possibly a lot longer. The same stages outlined above for letters may again be present in the note, but normally with more detail. Such notes are likely to be refereed, and often there are replies from the original authors. Short notes can also be used to make a particular point in general, rather than target a specific person. Short notes are accepted as 'rapid responses' to articles on some journal web sites, and new readers can be directed to them when they download the original article (e.g. see <http://bmj.com>).

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