**BOOK REVIEWS**

Guidelines[[1]](#footnote-1)

INTRODUCTION

A *Book Review* is not a *Book Report*. While the latter is an ***external*** description of a book the former is a critical evaluation (***internal***) of it. Your review should have two basic goals: (a) to inform the reader about the content of the book, and (b) to provide an evaluation of the book’s quality. For this course you have to write reviews of the following books:

* Ross Hassig, *Mexico and the Spanish Conquest*, Norman: University of Oklahoma Press; Second Edition, 2006. [Due date: October 28]
* Henry Louis Gates, *Black in Latin America*, New York University Press, 2012. . [Due date: December 18]

In doing so you should have in mind the following steps:

READING THE BOOK

* **Get to know your book:** clearly establish what kind of book is this one and the author’s background.
* **A careful reading of the introduction of the book:** there you will find the objectives of the book and the questions/issues addressed by the author as well as the story of the book or other important methodological aspects.
* **Take notes as you read.** Notes will help you to remember everything you were thinking or feeling as you read the book. Notes remind you of why your change in feelings happened.
* **Pick out what you think is the main idea of the book.** The main idea is the focus of the story. Your job is to determine whether or not the author’s idea is good or groundbreaking in some way. Do you agree with the idea? Does the author support his/her idea well?
* **Write down any quotes that stand out to you.** Grasp those few lines of the book that you think summarize the work well, support a theme or argument, or is a good example of the author’s style.

STRUCTURING THE REVIEW

1. **Book reviews begin with a brief summary of the book’s theme**. That is, the basic events your author investigates. Why these facts are relevant?
   1. Do NOT spend more than one-third or so of the paper summarizing the book. The summary should consist of a discussion and highlights of the major arguments, features, trends, concepts, themes, ideas, and characteristics of the book.
   2. While you may use direct quotes from the book (make sure you always give the page number), such quotes should never be the bulk of the summary. Much of your grade will depend on how well you describe and explain the material IN YOUR OWN WORDS.
   3. You might want to take the major organizing themes of the book and use them to organize your own discussion. This does NOT mean, however, that you have to provide a chapter-by-chapter summary. Your goal is a unified essay.
2. **Discuss the specific approach adopted by the author**. Does he or she propose a theory? What conceptual framework is displayed? How the book is made? What kinds of sources are used? In other words, revealed to your reader the process of research upon which this piece is based on. Identify the author’s thesis and explain it in your own words.
3. **Keep your audience in mind.** Remember that your audience has not read the book. So must carefully move from basic information to the more complex matters. Pretend that you have not read the book. Are you able to understand everything that you have written? Do you get a good sense of the book’s plot, character, and themes? Is your writing easy to understand? Does your argument make sense?
4. **Do not pretend to cover the whole book.** Thin more about describing the ***structure*** and the ***nature*** of the book. To do so you must pick up a few points that can allow you to give the reader a sense on how this book has been made.
5. **Write your critical evaluation of the book.** Choose one to three major points to discuss about the book. This is where you can discuss the themes of the book. This is also where you give your opinion of the book.
   1. You can use quotes to support your argument but make sure that they are not too long, since you do not have much room to write. What themes did the author convey? Were they effectively conveyed? Did you agree with them? Did the book appeal to you either emotionally or logically? Did you like the book? Why or why not? What was the author’s style like? Did you like the author’s style?
   2. A critique consists of thoughts, responses, and reactions. It is not necessarily negative. Nor do you need to know as much about the subject as the author. The skills you need are an ability to follow an argument and test a hypothesis. Regardless of how negative or positive your critique is, you need to be able to justify and support your position.
   3. What is your overall opinion of the book? On what basis has this opinion been formulated? That is, tell the reader what you think and how you arrived at this judgment. What did you expect to learn when you picked up the book? To what extent – and how effectively – were your expectations met? Did you wish you could talk back to the author? Amplify upon and explain your reactions.
6. **In writing your Book Review** it is a good idea to connect the book’s content with broader historical topics either discussed in class or that of a particular concern for you. You can also introduce comparisons with other authors dealing with the same topic or even what other critics have said about the book you are reviewing as long as you adequately quote them. Be careful with plagiarism!

PREPARING THE FINAL DRAFT

1. **Have someone else read your review.** Getting someone else to read your work is a great way to make sure that what you have written is clear and easy to understand.
2. **Double check your spelling.** Make sure that the name of the author, the title of the book, the names of the characters, and the publisher are spelled correctly. If you have included quotes, make sure that they are accurate and match what is written in the book.
3. **The title of your piece:** It must read like this: Ross Hassig, *Mexico and the Spanish Conquest*, Norman: University of Oklahoma Press; Second Edition, 2006. Reviewed by (your name) and Henry Louis Gates, *Black in Latin America*, New York University Press, 2012. Reviewed by (your name)
4. **Proofread your review.** Make sure there are no typos and that everything is grammatically correct. Read your review out loud to check for any awkward sentences. Reading your writing out loud helps you to determine whether or not your writing sounds awkward.
5. **Length and Formatting:** Between 5 or 6 pages. 1.5 space, 12 points, Times New Roman style. Do not forget to enumerate your paper and do not use a separate page for the title. You must submit both an electronic and a hard copy.

1. Sources: “How to Write a Critical BR” [https://apps.carleton.edu/ curricular/history/resources/study/ criticalbookreview/](https://apps.carleton.edu/%20curricular/history/resources/study/%20criticalbookreview/); [How to Write a Book Review](http://www.wikihow.com/Write-a-Book-Review) <http://www.wikihow.com/Write-a-Book-Review> and

   Robert Blackey, "Words to the Whys: Crafting Critical Book Reviews," The History Teacher, 27.2 (Feb. 1994): 159-66. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)