

Writing a Book Review

1. Most important: This is a book review, not a book report. Do not tell the about the book, instead describe what makes the book good or bad, informative or redundant, useful or useless.
2. Make sure that you model your review on those of other professionals. Read reviews in the *Journal of American History* to observe how historians write reviews of books and emulate them.
3. Analyze, analyze, analyze. Provide your reader with a cogent examination of the book's content, sources, argument, strengths, and weaknesses.
4. Don't tell, show. If you say the book is repetitive, give an example. If you say the author constructs a complicated, hard to follow argument, give an example. If you say the book is poorly organized, give an example, If you say the author provides a fresh and intriguing argument, give an example

This is the format I follow when writing a book review of around 700 words.

- I) Introduction (1-2 paragraphs)
 - a. Introductory (thesis) paragraph – Give the reader a preview of the book review. Tell the reader the good and bad parts of the book in general terms: “*Cowboy Conservatism*, by Sean P. Cunningham, lands squarely in the latter category. Marred by a weak and unsupported argument, superficial secondary research, and wearying factual and interpretative errors, the book fails to advance our understanding of the modern right or even Texas politics in any meaningful way.”

- II) Set Up
2-5 Paragraph description of the book
There are a couple of ways to do this; I usually spend one or two paragraphs describing the content and structure of the book and then move into part three. Others spend more time on summary/description. Here's an example of the first:

“Tracing the literary (and occasionally political) careers of the Mad Dogs - Dan Jenkins, Larry L. King, Gary Cartwright, Billy Lee Brammer, Bud Shrake, and Peter Gent - Davis demonstrates how these six men reflect the history of those who came of age just after World War II and who welcomed the changes of the 1960s. Make no mistake, this isn't the mythic tale of how some gaggle of hippie Texas writers took on the establishment. It's much more nuanced than that, it's the story of how a group of ambitious and talented intellectuals emerged from the buttoned-down world of 1950s Dallas and embraced the values of the liberal sixties.”

And here's an example of the second: “Using a constellatory approach, Fryer seeks to understand how the federal government managed “demographic control” of different types of wartime populations. analysis of these spaces as “security structures” adds to our understanding of the West during the war years (p. 9). Fryer points out and unpacks the meaning and legacy of the shared experiences of

nineteenth-century Native Americans driven onto a reservation, the world's most brilliant physicists shut off from the outside world in an isolated compound on the Parajito Plateau, black shipyard workers congregated within the infrastructural nightmare of a federally created insta-city, and the thousands of innocent American citizens and legal residents of Japanese descent gathered up and locked away in the Utah desert. As she does so, she illuminates the similarities in experience for what on first glance appears to be groups of very different people. More ambitious, but ultimately less convincing, is her argument that the federal government's motive in each of these locations was to somehow alleviate fears of the Other among a more general population of Americans and to instill small-town American values among the constituencies under their authority."

What all this means:

- a. Tell how the book is organized: thematically, chronologically, through case studies, anecdotal, etc. . .
- b. What evidence does the author use?
- c. What is the author's argument?
- d. Does the book have a bibliography, footnotes, an index, graphs, maps, etc. . . ?
- e. How well is the book written?

III) Your argument

The book is good (3 reasons why), the book is bad (three reasons why).

The book is good but flawed/dull/too long/asks the wrong questions/uses the wrong evidence/uses evidence incorrectly

"The main problem with *Put Your Bodies on the Wheels* is that Heineman does not seem to take his subject seriously. He refuses to acknowledge the authenticity of the motivations behind large-scale student movements or the legitimacy of students' goals. Civil Rights for minorities, equality for women, exploring alternatives to bourgeois consumer society, and ending the war in Vietnam, appear too often in Heineman's text as merely excuses to party or seek sexual conquest. By focusing primarily on the negative, radical, and prurient aspects of the sixties, Heineman loses his objectivity and produces less a work of history than a politically conservative polemic."

IV) Conclusion: Come back to the wider world; how does this book fit into larger arguments about the subject, time period, or methodology:

"By failing to analyze Smith's public silence on issues that were clearly important to him, Mitchell loses an ideal opportunity to more critically explore the tortuous choices that southern liberals made in the 1940s and 1950s. He almost completely ignores the larger, much more interesting question about how Smith negotiated his private beliefs with the practicality of enacting public policy. Nowhere in Mitchell's account do we witness Smith suffering over his choices. Instead, Mitchell uses the last half of the book to recount the internecine battles within the Mississippi

congressional delegation and provide blow-by-blow accounts of Smith's modest legislative and bureaucratic successes.”