

How to do a Book Review

A handout created by the **CEU Philosophy Tacit Knowledge Group**, as part of the 2015 Philosophy R&P Lab sessions. (Source: <https://ceurplab.wordpress.com/>)

How do I Prepare to Write a Book Review?

Active Reading of the Book

- Don't get lost in the details: stay in survey mode.
- Collect flashy quotes. But do not use too many of them in the review.
- Go back to the introduction repeatedly.
- Use the Table of Contents and Index for the 'art of non-reading'.
- Get some anchors, such as purpose/concrete goal of the book, keywords, and core references.
- Read actively, i.e. adapt speed and intensity, given the focus set by your interest and/or readership.
- Write early! Make notes continuously, best without looking at the book (Kavéház, grandma mode).
- Start getting background information, but only after you drafted a first version.

Goal and structure of a book review

- Goal: A book review should help the reader to decide whether the book is worthwhile to buy/to read. The goal is not to tutor or address the author.
- Length: 500-1000 words. Ask about the length if regulations do not contain anything on it.
- Time for doing it: usually at least 4 weeks, but this varies a lot.

Journal/Readership

- Choose your journal/blog for the book review since that will determine the readership.
- Remember that the significance of the author's work might be relative to the readership or journal in which the review will appear.

What is the Content of a Book Review?

Book reviews content both positive and critical aspects, in this section of the handout these will be indicated with the following symbols

(+) = Positive aspects of the review

(+/-) = Positive & Critical aspects of the review

(-) = Critical aspects of the review

Topic of the book (+)

- What kind of book is it (textbook, research monograph, ...)?

- What is the declared purpose and concrete goal of the book? What is its main argument?
- Try first (and as long as possible) to evaluate the book according to the author's goals (internal critique)!
- Do a brief summary of the content (250 words roughly should always suffice). Use ToC, index, and keywords to stay in the abstracting mode. You can use make use of keywords to structure your summary (imagine that you tell the content of the book to your grandma on the phone, or record it verbally).
- Present the main arguments of each part of the book and show the links between the parts. Express your negative criticism either after you presented the arguments contained in that specific part of the book, or towards the end of your review (but not in the conclusion).

Quality of content, methods (+/-)

- Which methods are used, were they made explicit, did the author deviate from them?
- Are the methods appropriate, given the declared goal of the book?
- Is the content rigorous and substantive? Is the author well-informed about the issues related to the book?
- Are the examples presented compelling and engaging?
- Are the arguments being made new? Is the question new?
- Is the Author introducing new elements to a debate or offering a new perspective on the debate?
- What would someone who hasn't read the book gain from reading it?

Writing style (+/-)

- Is the style suited for the kind of readership the book is presumably for? What background knowledge should the reader possess?
- Is the structure clear and precise?
- Is the book engaging, is the style affecting, is it a pleasant read?

Organisation (+/-)

- What is the impact of the general structure of the book on the main argument? Does it help or hurt? Is there evidence of a specific reason for the author to choose the organisational scheme he/she did?
- Focus on the cohesiveness and coherence of the sections with respect to both their function within the whole book and their mutual relations. Does every section have a clear argument? Evaluating the internal relations among arguments in different sections can provide insight for better the overall structure of the book.
- Is there any part (section or argument) of the book which appears to be isolated or detached from the rest? Why?

Critical points? (-)

- Are there any blind spots in the author's argument or overview of the topic?
- If blind spots affect the argument or goal highlight its effect without being argumentative.
- If possible make concluding remarks on the book, what it did or did not accomplish, what was good or bad about the book, etc.

Be critical, but do not write an argumentative piece. If you find your piece is becoming too argumentative you could try:

- Pointing out potential issues for further consideration outside the scope of the review, i.e., 'this is not the place to pursue this argument/concern'.
- Opening a new document and starting afresh whilst keeping your argumentative points in the original file. Perhaps to develop at a later time for an argumentative piece.

How do I Publish a Book Review?

There are three common ways to end up writing a book review for publication. You will get a free book if you do a book review. There are three ways to get it:

(1) you might get asked,

But you might also take initiative

- (2) by approaching the publisher, or
- (3) by approaching a journal.

If there is a book you want to review, you can always ask the review editor of the journal (e.g. many journals print a list of books received for review). Give reasons why you want to review it (e.g. you are doing your research on the area).

Well-known review journals/blogs:

- Notre Dame Philosophical Reviews (NDPR): <https://ndpr.nd.edu>
- ISIS: <http://www.press.uchicago.edu/ucp/journals/journal/isis.html>

Comprehensive lists of Philosophy Journals?

Probably, no list will be truly comprehensive, but there are ranked lists (e.g. according to expert judgments, or citation indices) and alphabetic lists.

Alphabetic lists:

- PhilPapers list: <http://philpapers.org/journals> (probably most inclusive)
- ESF journal list: <https://dbh.nsd.uib.no/publiseringskanaler/erihplus/> (choose discipline and you get a full list with links to the Sherpa Romeo status (about open access policies of the journal).
- You could also ask faculty members about a list of journals suitable for your topics. Libraries sometimes have lists about journals subscribed to at the institutions, but often these are not very selective since many, many journals are included via database purchase that are not considered to be top journals and some top generals are quite expensive. So, it depends on the University whether or not it can afford all top journals.

Ranked lists:

Are published by institutions such as the European Research Council or by individuals. There is plenty of discussion on these:

- http://the-brooks-blog.blogspot.hu/2011/09/journal-rankings-for-philosophy_29.html,
- <http://certaindoubts.com/philosophy-journal-information-esf-rankings-citation-impact-rejection-rates/>,
- <http://philosopherscocon.typepad.com/blog/2013/08/rankings-what-are-they-good-for.html>

What if I got asked to review a book and think the book is not good?

- If you get asked, have a quick look and decide whether you have enough reasons to review it to take the risk (you wanted to read it anyway; you need to say something on the topic).
- If you do not want to take the risk or you have other reasons not to accept the invitation, then recommend 2-3 people who might be able to review the book.
- If it turns out that (in-between, in the end) you think the book is not good enough to write a review, then immediately either return the book so that the editors can find an alternative referee or ask whether you can do something really short (more like a notice). Some journals offer this option. But this should be a worst-case scenario. The first step should be taken seriously to prevent returns and delays.

Further advice

Read lots of book reviews! Not just from philosophy. For additional material on book reviews see:

- ANU's Website: <https://academicskills.anu.edu.au/resources/handouts/writing-critical-book-review>
- Purdue Owl: <https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/704/01/>

References

Sarton, George. 1960. "Notes on the Reviewing of Learned Books" *Science*. New Series, Vol. 131, No. 3408 (Apr. 22, 1960), pp. 1182-1187.

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