



## From the editor: Ways to write a good book review

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I would like to use this introduction as an opportunity to outline some basic strategies of reviewing that produce good, readable, and useful book reviews. Following these will maximize the benefit and readability of a book review.

1. Focus on what the book actually says, not on what you want to say. You can, of course, give us your opinion of it, but this should never come at the expense of ignoring the book's argument. After all, you are reviewing someone else's work, not your own. Even if you disagree with a book, readers generally expect the review to tell them at least what the argument is, how it is justified, and how it relates to other literature in a certain field. You can tell the reader that while telling us why you like it or dislike it. But typically few readers appreciate a reviewer's opinion if they have no idea what that opinion is responding to. Do not evaluate a book in terms of what you would have written. Try to understand what the authors you are reviewing have tried to do, and whether they have succeeded on their own terms, before you tell us why or not they have succeeded on yours.
2. Avoid a mechanical, chapter-by-chapter description of the book. This approach usually produces uninspired reviews. Some parts of the book may be more important than others, and you can focus on those. But the best reviews sketch out the overall thesis of the book. The review may, of course, explain how the book is structured and how its argument progresses, but keep in mind that reviewing a book is not the same as reading it.
3. Pay attention to language and meaning. Avoid jargon, and do not worry too much about what you think specialized academics like to hear. Do not use complex sentences; be short, concise, and to the point. If the book is complex, do not reproduce its complexity. Tell us what you are able to get out of it. It is better not to do the review than to write gibberish. Do not try to sound needlessly profound. Be concise and to the point. Your language needs to make sense.
4. Keep in mind that your audience is international, not local or regional. Do not assume that all our readers are familiar with the minutia of local or national debates, even if you happen to live in a large country or feel that your country (or its social science community) is important.
5. Keep in mind that your audience is general. Write for a general audience of sociologists, not specialists in your own area. Our readers come from all the subfields

in sociology. Think of your review as an opportunity to explain debates in your own specialty area to a larger audience of social scientists. Get out of your national, regional, and subdisciplinary shell, even your sociological shell. Think of the ability to communicate across various divides as a calling.

6. Although publishing reviews may add to your professional credentials, reviews should never be done *exclusively* for that purpose. It is easier to write reviews if you are genuinely interested in the ideas and debates in the books.
7. Keep notes and references to an absolute minimum; it is preferable to avoid them altogether. A book review is not the place for an extended thesis. Save that for a full-length article.

In general, a review is an opportunity to engage in debates and ideas, learn something new, and provide a valuable service to a large, educated audience. But it should also be an enjoyable activity. The best reviews are usually written by those who enjoy writing them.

**Mohammed A Bamyeh**