

Tips for writing book reviews

Guidelines for those wishing to contribute book reviews to the library's review blog at <http://hiawathalibrary.wordpress.com>.

Finding books to review

Can I review books I own already?

Can I review audiobooks, children's books, or movies?

Can I review a book the library doesn't own?

Can my friend/sister/coworker review books too?

Can I review a book even if someone else already reviewed it on the site?

The answer to all the preceding questions is "Yes"!

Getting ready to write

Read the book. Don't try to write a review of a book until you have read it in its entirety, but it might be useful to make a few notes on character names or other observations as you read. Before you begin writing the review, reflect on the book and make a few notes about the points you want to get across. While you're writing, try thinking of your reader as a friend to whom you're telling a story, or to whom you are writing a letter or email. A conversational tone is easier to read than complex sentences and may invite the reader to leave you feedback, or a comment, on your review.

Two things to include in your review: summary and opinion

You can decide how you want to organize your book review. Do you want it to be long or short? Choose whether you want it to be mostly summary with only one sentence of opinion, or a brief summary with a lengthy opinion. As long as the book review helps the reader decide whether they might enjoy reading the book, almost anything goes. These guidelines provide some ideas to get you started, but please use your creativity and your own judgment in your review.

Summary and overview

This part of your review answers the question "What is the book about?". Try to get the main theme of the book across in the beginning of your review. In a **fiction** book, include a brief summary of the story. Don't give away the ending or any details that would ruin the suspense for the reader! In a **non-fiction** book, mention the author's viewpoint, the purpose of the book, and the main points. You might address what kind of evidence the author uses to prove his or her point, the author's expertise on the subject, or how the book relates to other books on the same topic. If appropriate for your book, describe the **setting** of the book. How does it compare or contrast to the world you know? Does the author make you feel like you're a part of the setting? Can you picture the book's setting if you close your eyes? This might only be part of one sentence for some books, or an entire paragraph for others. Describe the book's **main characters**. Does the writer make you believe in them as people? Why or why not?

Think about whether you like the characters and about how liking them or disliking them makes you feel about the book. Was there a moral to this story? Did the characters grow or respond naturally to the storyline? Give your reader a taste of the **plot**, but don't give the surprises away. They want to know enough about what happens in a book to decide whether they'll find it interesting. Remember, they never want to know the ending! Summarize the plot in a way that will answer some questions about the book, but leave other questions in the reader's mind. You might mention the pacing of the story - was it too slow in parts, or too fast in others? Did you like the way the story began? Did the ending seem appropriate for the story? Mentioning the mood – scary, funny, light-hearted – can help the reader of your review decide whether they might enjoy this book.

Opinion and criticism

This section of your review answers the question “So what?” or “Why should I care?”. Criticism in the context of book reviews does not (necessarily) mean that you write negative comments about the book, criticism means that you think about the book, evaluate and analyze what you have read, and offer your opinion or judgment. A positive book review is the most pleasant for the reader, even if you have to explain that the book did not meet your expectations or that some aspect was disappointing. Try to focus on why another reader might want to read the book and on what they might enjoy. The old saying “Silence is golden” is true for book reviews. If you can't think of anything good to say about a book, find another book to review instead. Think about whether the book is part of a **genre**. Does the book fit into a type like mystery, adventure, or romance? What aspects of the genre does it use? What book or author does this book remind you of? What other similar books might a reader enjoy? What do you like or dislike about the book's **writing style**? Is it funny? Does it give you a sense of the place it's set? What is the author's/narrator's "voice" like? Make sure your review explains how you feel about the book and why, not just what the book is about. A good review should express the **reviewer's opinion** and persuade the reader to share it, to read the book, or to avoid reading it.

Going the extra mile

If a book is so influential that it changes your outlook or you start recommending it to everyone you see, you might want to add extra information in your review. Do research about the author or the background of the book and incorporate what you learn into the review. This added information gives your review depth and places the book in the context of its creation.

Finishing touches

Proofreading doesn't have to be an arduous task. Read through each paragraph and make sure the main point is clear. Use a spell-check program to catch typos. If a sentence or paragraph seems awkward or unclear, rewrite it. Try to simplify your writing when possible, making shorter sentences and clarifying any confusing parts. Make sure you are not repeating yourself. Another proofreading tip is to read the review out loud to catch awkward phrasing. If you ask

another person to read the review, tell them what you are hoping they notice—spelling and grammar errors, or general readability. If you are specific in what you need help with, they can offer you more helpful feedback.

Reading other reviews

When writing your own reviews, it helps to read other fiction reviews. You will develop your own unique voice as a reviewer, but you can also look at other reviewers to find a style or format that you appreciate, and then emulate that style when you are writing your first reviews. (Note: avoid reading reviews of the same book you are reviewing, at least until your review is finished.) Look for [“Links for Book Lovers”](#) on the Library’s Book Review blog for a collection of review websites.