The following paragraphs are excerpted from The University of Calgary’s History Student’s Handbook, at http://hist.ucalgary.ca/essay/HistoryStudentsHandbook.pdf  Copyright 2007.

The Art of the Book Review

“A book review is an assessment of a work. Book reviews not only report on the content of a book, but also evaluate and critique the work by considering the author’s argument, structure, evidence and logic....The book review accomplishes these tasks in a limited number of words, usually between 500 and 750 words, or 2-3 double spaced pages [unless an instructor has given a different length requirement]. It is important to think of the book review as short essay which means it has an introduction, argument, body, and conclusion.”

The Introduction or First Paragraph

“The introduction to a book review should begin ... by placing the complete citation for the book [in the correct citation format] at the head of the review. The first paragraph should state the argument that is developed in the book in one, succinct sentence... give the themes of the book...and take a position on the overall strengths and weaknesses of the book. Like essays, good book reviews have a thesis statement, which is the argument you will be making, for example, ‘In his book Innocence Abroad, historian Benjamin Schmidt successfully shows the relevance of Dutch activities in the new world.’ This thesis sentence suggests that the author was successful in achieving the goal and argument set for the book, while other thesis statements might be negative about his accomplishments.”

The Body of the Book Review

“The body of the book review is used to answer a number of questions about the book....The review should be as comprehensive as possible.” [Use the following questions as a guide, but do not feel that you must answer every question. Important: Do not include the question in question form; instead, answer the question in effectively written declarative sentences which communicate a complete answer to the question under consideration.]

1) **What issues does the book cover?** It is not necessary to summarize the entire book, or even each chapter. Instead, include a paragraph which indicates the chronological and thematic sweep of the book, the main issues that are addressed, and how these contribute to the overall thesis of the book....Does the introduction properly introduce the main themes of the book?

2) **What is relevant about the author and the audience?** What other relevant books has this author written? Are there specific aspects of the author’s background that affect (positively or negatively) the author’s interpretation? Who should or should not read this book [to which audience will it appeal, who will be able to understand it, and why]? Why was this book written [authors often explain this in their introductions]?

3) **What historical genre and theoretical approach best fits this book?** Is this a biography, an economic, cultural, social, intellectual, environmental, political military or religious study? What methodology or critical method does the author employ... [Examples might include Marxist, Whig, feminist, or revisionist methods]? Is the author’s approach biased in a way that he or she may not even realize?

4) **What evidence does the author use?** Is the book based on primary or secondary research? Is the primary research based on archival documents or printed sources? Does the way the author presents evidence created a skewed interpretation? Does the author effectively consider evidence or works that challenge his or her interpretation, or does the author fail to do this? Does the evidence present any interpretation to you that the author failed to mention or consider?

5) **How, and how well, is the information presented?** Is the book organized and structured well? Is the argument presented thematically or chronologically, or does the author use a combination of both? Are important terms sufficiently defined? Does the writing flow well? Is the book easy or difficult to read,
The Heart of the Book Review

“Criticism, or evaluation, is at the heart of a book review. A good book review can tell others whether or not they should read a book and in what ways they should be cautious while reading it. Negative criticism must be constructive and you must be able to back your criticism up with something. It is not enough to write, ‘I do not like the way the argument is developed.’ You need to be able to explain what is wrong with the argument and how could it be made better? You might write, instead, ‘The argument, though strongly asserted, is not persuasive because the author has not used enough primary sources,’ [or ‘because the author has given omitted vital dates or ‘because the argument is so evidently biased’ (remember to give an explanation of the nature of the bias)].”

The Conclusion

“Your concluding paragraph should comment on the overall significance of the work. ...What new questions has the author bought up or answered? What further work needs to be done on the subject now that this book has been written? What are the overall strengths and weaknesses of the work? For example if the author has placed too much emphasis on one theme to the exclusion of another, this is noteworthy. Focus on issues of key importance such as the strength of the thesis and the contribution of the book to its field.”

Works Cited Page Examples:

Below you see the citation of the same book in three different formats.
Use the Citation Format Recommended By Your Professor

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