



**UNIVERSITE DE COCODY**

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**UFR : LANGUES, LITTERATURES  
ET CIVILISATIONS**

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**DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH**

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**SECOND-YEAR CURRICULUM**

# **WRITING A CRITICAL BOOK REVIEW**

Course Supplement devised by Associate Professor KOUAKOU Jules.

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## **WRITING A BOOK REVIEW**

### **Definition of General Objectives**

A book review is a thorough description, critical analysis, and/or evaluation of the quality, meaning, and significance of a book, often written in relation to prior research on the topic. Reviews generally range from 500-2000 words, but may be longer or shorter depending on the length and complexity of the book being reviewed, the overall purpose of the review, and whether the review examines two or more books that focus on the same topic. Book reviews are assigned as practice to carefully analyze complex scholarly texts and to assess learners' ability to effectively synthesize research so that they reach an informed perspective about the topic being covered.

### **I-THEORIES**

**Two approaches generally come under considering when reviewing a book:**

1. **Descriptive review:** It presents the content and structure of a book as objectively as possible, describing essential information about a book's purpose and authority. This is done by stating the perceived aims and purposes of the study, often incorporating passages quoted from the text that highlight key elements of the work. Additionally, there may be some indication of the reading level and anticipated audience.
2. **Critical review:** It describes and evaluates the book in relation to accepted literary and historical standards and supports this evaluation with evidence from the text and, in most cases, in contrast to and in comparison with the research of others. It should include a statement about what the author has tried to do, evaluate how well you believe the author has succeeded in meeting the objectives of the study, and present evidence to support this assessment. For academic purposes, this course privileges this type of review.

### **Purposes for Book Reviewing**

While book reviews vary in tone, subject, and style, they share some common features. These include:

1. **A review gives the reader a concise summary of the content.** This includes a description of the research topic and scope of analysis as well as an overview of the book's overall perspective, argument, and purpose.
2. **A review offers a critical assessment of the content in relation to other studies on the same topic.** This involves documenting your reactions to the work under review - what strikes you as noteworthy or important, whether or not the arguments made by the author(s) were effective or persuasive, and how the work enhanced your understanding of the research problem under investigation.
3. In addition to analyzing a book's strengths and weaknesses, a scholarly review **often recommends whether or not readers would value the work for its authenticity and overall quality.** This measure of quality includes both the author's ideas and arguments and covers practical issues, such as, readability and language, organization and layout, indexing, and, if needed, the use of non-textual elements. To maintain your focus, always keep in mind that most assignments ask you **to discuss a book's treatment of its topic, not the topic itself.** Your key sentences should say, "This book shows...," "The study demonstrates...," or "The author argues...," rather than "This happened..." or "This is the case...."

## **Methodological Approaches**

There is no definitive methodological approach to writing a book review in literature and the humanities, although learners need to think critically about the research problem under investigation before they begin to write in social sciences especially. Therefore, writing a book review is a two-step process:

- 1) developing an argument about the value of the work under consideration, and
- 2) clearly articulating that argument as you write an organized and well-supported assessment of the work

## **Common Steps in Reviewing a Book**

1. Start with a couple of sentences describing what the book is about
2. Discuss what you particularly liked about the book
3. Mention anything you disliked about the book
4. Round up your review
5. You can give the book a rating, for example a mark out of five or ten, if you like.

## Important Elements of a Review

***A Strong Introduction:*** In a successful review, you must begin with a lead paragraph that grabs the reader's attention and introduces the review's subject. Often, a significant quotation that captures the essence of the work can be used to garner interest in the selected text and what you have to say about it. Your introduction should also provide the basic details of the review's subject: title, author, publication date, genre, page count, etc. The best reviews then continue with a synopsis of the text and conclude the lead paragraphs with the reviewer's overall impression of the text.

***A Solid Conclusion:*** In many ways, your review's conclusion is as important as its introduction. In your final paragraph, you need to offer summative comments about your opinion of the author's success or failure in the selected text. Readers of reviews are particularly interested in your parting shots. The conclusion is ultimately where you will endorse or reject the text, encouraging your readers to purchase it or bypass it in favour of something else. Remember two important rules as you compose your final paragraph:

1. Be impartial in your judgment. If you decide to caution readers against the text, make sure you have clearly outlined your reasons for doing so. By the same token, glowing whitewashed praise is unconvincing as well.
2. Make sure you are evaluating the book the author wrote and not the book you *wish* the author had written.

**Note:** In addition to a strong introduction and a solid conclusion, reviews of both fiction and nonfiction rely on supportive **body paragraphs** to help establish your claims about the text under consideration. However, the focus of those body paragraphs depends on the genre about which you're writing.

## The Focus of a Non-Fiction Review

The primary focus of a nonfiction review is *the clarity of the text's communication*. Nonfiction books are typically written to convey information to the reader. As you build your review of such a text, you need to note a variety of important items:

- **Evaluate the author's intentions.** What is the author's primary purpose? What does he or she hope to communicate to the reader? Your estimation of the author's success in this endeavour informs much of your final evaluation of the text's worth.
- **Consider the text's organization.** Does it progress in a logical fashion that is easily followed? Did you have any problems following the author's train of thought?
- **Identify its place in the larger body of scholarship.** How well does your selected text match up to others like it in the field? What are its shortcomings and limitations?
- **Take note of its support sections.** Does the author provide substantive footnotes throughout? Is the index or the preface particularly useful? Features such as these contribute to a text's overall clarity and effectiveness, and they can help it to stand out and earn favourable reviews when compared to similar nonfiction texts.

## The Focus of a Fiction Review

The primary focus of a fiction review is *the author's skill in crafting a compelling story*. The success of a novel or short story can be measured, in part, by how well the text draws the reader into the plot and the characters. When writing a fiction review, you will need to answer the following questions:

- **What was the story about?** Typically, the events in the story are referred to as the plot. Your discussion of it should include the main developments without revealing the end to the readers of your review. You will also want to provide evaluative commentary on the plot. Was it engaging? If so, explain what made it so. If not, share that in your review.
- **Who were the characters?** Take some time to identify the main characters and what made them memorable. Were they believable? Did the author's portrayal of

them evoke sympathy? You may want to even identify your favourite character and explain why.

- **What is the author's style like?** You will want to talk about the author's tone, use of language, and quality of imagery. Works of fiction with perfectly serviceable plots can be ruined by a clumsy use of language or tone-deaf writing. If you encounter this in your selected text, be sure to identify this shortcoming in your review.

## Sample Templates of Book Review

Two templates are fitting for the review of fiction narrative: the “Essay-Style Book Review” and the “Classic Book Review”

### 1- Essay-Style Book Review

The review of novel is a multi-paragraph review, usually with no headers. It's the same format most newspapers and academics use for book reviews. Many essay-style reviews use informal categories in their writing, often discussing setting, writing, characters, and plot in their own paragraphs. They usually also discuss the big themes/messages of a story. Here are some questions to consider when writing an essay-style review:

- **What is the author trying to do?** Don't evaluate a romance novel based on a mystery novel's criteria. First try to think about what the book was attempting to do, then try to evaluate if they achieved it. You can still note if you didn't like it, but it's good to know what it was aiming for first.
- **What are some of the themes of the story?** What big message should the reader take away? Did you agree with what the book seemed to be saying? Why or why not?
- **How is this story relevant to the world?** What is it saying about the time it was written in? About human nature? About society or current issues? Depending on the book, there may be more or less to dig into here.
- **What did this book make you think about?** It may be that the themes in the book were just a launching off point. How did they inspire your own thinking? How did this book change you?

## **2- Classic Book Review**

This is probably the most common kind of book review template. It uses a few criteria, usually including Setting, Writing, Characters, and Plot (for a novel). The review then goes into some detail about each element, describing what the book did well, and where it fell short.

The advantage of this format is that it's very straightforward and applies to almost any fiction read. It can also be adapted—you will likely have more to say about the plot in a mystery/thriller than a character study of a novel. A drawback, though, is that it can feel limiting. You might have thoughts that don't neatly fit into these categories, or you could feel like you don't have enough to say about some of the categories.

### **Writing a Critical Book Review**

The purpose for writing a critique is to evaluate somebody's work (a book, an essay, a movie, a painting...) in order to increase the reader's understanding of it. A critical analysis is subjective writing because it expresses the writer's opinion or evaluation of a text. Analysis means to break down and study the parts. Writing a critical paper requires two steps: critical reading and critical writing.

#### **Critical Reading:**

1. Identify the author's thesis and purpose
2. Analyze the structure of the passage by identifying all main ideas
3. Consult a dictionary or encyclopedia to understand material that is unfamiliar to you
4. Make an outline of the work or write a description of it
5. Write a summary of the work
6. Determine the purpose which could be
  - To inform with factual material
  - To persuade with appeal to reason or emotions
  - To entertain (to affect people's emotions)
7. Evaluate the means by which the author has accomplished his purpose
  - If the purpose is to inform, has the material been presented clearly, accurately, with order and coherence?

- If the purpose is to persuade, look for evidence, logical reasoning, contrary evidence
- If the purpose was to entertain, determine how emotions are affected: does it make you laugh, cry, angry? Why did it affect you?

**Note:** Consider the following questions: How is the material organized? Who is the intended audience? What are the writer's assumptions about the audience? What kind of language and imagery does the author use?

### **Sample Outline for Writing a Critical Review Essay**

After the passage under analysis has been carefully studied, the critique can be drafted using this sample outline.

1. Background information to help your readers understand the nature of the work
  - 1.1- Information about the work
    - Title
    - Author
    - Publication information
    - Statement of topic and purpose
  - 1.2- Thesis statement indicating writer's main reaction to the work
2. Summary or description of the work
3. Interpretation and/or evaluation
  - Discussion of the work's organization
  - Discussion of the work's style
  - Effectiveness
  - Discussion of the topic's treatment
  - Discussion of appeal to a particular audience

## **II-APPLICATION**

Write the review of Shimmer Chinodya's *Dew in the Morning* (2001) choosing one of the templates and following the guidelines provided in this lesson.



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