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# An Important Scholarly Exercise: What it Takes to Write a Valuable Book Review and Why

Charles F. Howlett Ph.D.  
Molloy College, [chowlett@molloy.edu](mailto:chowlett@molloy.edu)

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# The American Historian

ORGANIZATION OF AMERICAN HISTORIANS

A shopping cart is shown from a first-person perspective, moving down a brightly lit aisle in a store. The aisle is lined with shelves of colorful products, and the floor is highly reflective, creating a bokeh effect of light spots. A black sign with the word "Consumption" in a stylized, orange-red font is attached to the front of the cart.

## Consumption

ALSO INSIDE:

History and Empathy

How to Write a Book Review

Charles F. Howlett

# An Important Scholarly Exercise: What it Takes to Write a Valuable Book Review and Why

So, you've been asked to write a book review. Consider it an honor, not a burden. Younger scholars, in particular, often consider reviewing an onerous task detracting from their own scholarly research, interests, and desires, or that it takes up too much time. But I would argue that there are important benefits to be derived from writing book reviews. One of the most notable is that reviewing books not only expands one's personal library of learning, but it also fosters disciplined reading habits. Failing to read and report on books deprives scholars of one of the academic opportunities of being well read in their field.

In addition, reviewing books not only benefits the author but also helps readers decide whether or not to spend time and money on a book. A good review will most certainly be read and appreciated for its own sake by readers who may otherwise demonstrate no inclination of even consulting the book. More specifically for the book reviewer, it is most beneficial that your opinion be respected since it can generally provide you with an avenue for your own scholarly submissions. Very often, this last aspect is overlooked on the part of younger scholars seeking to publish their research and findings to advance their own fledgling careers.

How does one actually write a book review that can be appreciated by the scholarly community? First, the most important aspect to keep in mind is that it should be interesting and to the point. Historical works, in particular, require thoughtful deliberation and reflection. Noted journals in the field of history such as the *American Historical Review* and *Journal of American History*, as well as those in sub-disciplines geared to a specific audience such as *Diplomatic History*, *History of Education Quarterly*, *Journal of Cold War Studies*, and *Peace & Change*, among others, will specifically

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limit the number of words you can pen. This is where deliberation and reflection come into play in terms of addressing the journal's readership. Ask yourself this question: how will my review fit into the journal's scope and mission given its subscribership? Embrace it as an opportunity, not a restriction. Less is sometimes more and readers should not be sidetracked by superfluous and extraneous observations that add nothing to the discussion. Equally important, your review is really a creative composition. It should be neither a transcription of the book's contents nor a disguised summary of what the dust cover says. A scholarly review is not a report. Thus, in a few brief paragraphs, bring the larger work into focus through applying your own understanding of the subject and importance of the book. Again, whether the review is critical or praiseworthy, always keep your audience in mind. Readers of book reviews are not interested in your own predilections or predispositions. They want a thoughtful evaluation, which will hold you as accountable as that of the book's author. Be aware, also, that you should indicate the page numbers of any passages or phrases you choose to quote since accuracy adds to authoritativeness.

Second, make sure you address the most important points you,

as the reviewer, should cover. The primary obligation is to describe the author's or authors' purpose in writing the book; was the book's objective achieved? Assess the book's strengths and weaknesses while also addressing whether one aspect of the work dominates others—check for balance. It is critical that you place the book in the context of other works on the same subject to establish its significance or inability to measure up. You may also want to devote a few words about the author's qualifications in the field. Has the author published on the same subject before? Are there any biases inherent in the author's observations about the topic written? Think about the book's utility to the readership. For instance, is this a work that can be used in a survey class or is it more suited to an advanced course? A critical consideration these days is whether or not the cost of this work prohibits its widespread use in the classroom.

Third, if this is a new edition of an old work, your professional obligation is to discuss the extent to which the work has been revised from the previous edition and ask whether its significance still remain worthy of consideration. Very often new editions of classic works will have a new foreword by the editor of the latest reprint. If that is the case, touch on the ways the editor of the

new edition sheds additional light on its continuing contribution to the literature in the field. Are their differing viewpoints in terms of the revisionist literature in the field? Are their sidebars in the new addition for explanatory purposes?

Lastly, be on the alert to spot-check the book's accuracy for basic facts. Are the quotations accurate and, most importantly, are the citations proper? Is there a comprehensive list of references or annotated bibliography, or are some important sources not included that should be? Is the book's physical appearance helpful to its promotion? Does it have appropriate images and are they clearly reproduced to enhance the work's quality, not necessarily appearance. Equally important, is the editing from the publishing house first-rate or are there mistakes that are readily apparent? Additionally, be sure to note whether there is a foreword, introduction, notes, appendices, bibliography, index, type and number of illustrations, and if the book is in cloth, paperback, or both, and its cost in both venues. Usually, this is noted in the heading prior to writing the review.

I would also suggest that reviewers establish a checklist of the most important criteria to evaluate and to rank them in three categories: the work falls below expectations;



the work meets expectations but is not exceptional, although useful; and the work exceeds expectations and is an important contribution to scholarship. The criteria I recommend can be classified in the following way: (1) tone and substance of the work in terms of readability and writing style; (2) contribution to scholarship by offering new insights and valuable interpretations; (3) demonstrates knowledge in the field; (4) fulfills the author's stated objectives; (5) appropriate balance; (6) fair and objective without trying to sway readers' opinions; (7) quality of editing; (8) accuracy and appropriate citations; (9) complete references and bibliography—the book is not overloaded with works not pertinent or helpful to the topic; (10) illustrations, charts, and appendices, if appropriate; (11) the author consulted the relevant primary and secondary sources relative to the book's topic while also critiquing those secondary works as part of the narrative or contained in an annotated bibliography; and (12) overall recommendation to readers—why or why not should you read this book.

Of course, some reviewers may also have their own set of criteria or standards they wish to apply. What is important is that your review becomes part of your professional reputation. At the same time, you should make sure that you adhere to the journal's length limitation unless you believe that it merits a longer analysis; in that case, you must contact the journal's editor and explain why. Meeting the deadline for submitting your review is also very important and should not be taken lightly. Someone's career may hinge in the balance based on your review, so the sooner you get it done, the better for everyone. Thus, timeliness is of the essence as to the book's publication and the review's appearance. Keep it fresh since the review will often determine its true value to scholarship. An outdated review is a disservice to the author and readers.

Writing a book review is an art, a skill, and an obligation. How professionals communicate their observations on a particular topic or discipline remains one of the most important tasks we have as scholars. After all, how do we know what you really think about someone else's scholarly work unless you are willing to write that review? ■/▲■

## What Historians are Saying

The screenshot shows the OAH Blog homepage with a navigation menu at the top: HOME, ABOUT, HISTORIANS, PUBLIC, TEACHING, RESEARCH. Below the menu is a large featured article titled "OAH MEETINGS" with a photo of three people on a stage and the text "Friday Highlights at OAH 2017". To the right are several smaller article teasers:

- School Vandalism and American Democracy** (March 30, 2017)
- It's a Different World: Black Student Activism From the Civil Rights Movement Through the Trump Era** (March 29, 2017)
- The Arts in the Public Schools: An Intellectual History** (March 28, 2017)
- African American Educational Traditions and the Challenge of Desegregation** (April 3, 2017) by Ansley Erickson. Teaser text: "In the 1940s, Charles Houston and his team of NAACP attorneys took film cameras to schools in the rural South..."
- Labor and the Environmental Justice Movement: Why Their Shared History Matters Today** (April 19, 2017) by Josiah Rector. Teaser text: "The recent pipeline battle at Standing Rock, and the lead poisoning disaster in Flint, have once again thrust issues of environmental justice and environmental racism..."
- Escaping the Robot's Loop: Westworld and the Politics of Consciousness-Raising** (February 16, 2017) by Dustin Abnet. Teaser text: "Spoilers for Season 1 of Westworld below. 'Some people choose to see the ugliness in this world, the disarray. I choose to see the beauty...to believe there...'"

**Process: a blog for american history has a new design, now includes theme months, and can be accessed via Facebook and Twitter.**

Over the past 12 months, 170 posts have been published and include: a hosted Reddit AMA on *Roots* and American slavery; a five-part series on Henry Kissinger and historians; a four-part series on George Kennan and emotions; a three-part round table on teaching historiography; as well as a three-part round table on prisoners' rights. The 2016 election was a key focus, with posts on topics such as: the loose definition of "populism"; Donald Trump's rhetoric of "law and order"; the election's political ads; and neoliberalism and the Democratic party.

