1. ***Type Title of Book***

**Book Review**

Author’s Last Name, First Name, Initial. *Title of Book*. Place of Publication: Publisher’s Name, Date of Publication. Number of pages pp. $Cost

The assignment of a critical book review is intended to give the student an opportunity to critique the effectiveness of an author’s contribution to a specific area of study. The first step is to overview the book’s outline and contents. Identify the purpose of the book. Read the book carefully, making notes of important ideas and positions. Engage the author in ‘conversation’ as you read. Challenge his or her ideas and statements. Formulate your own position on the subject. Support your position with rational and clearly developed thinking. After completing these steps, you are ready to begin writing your critique.

A critical book review [or book critique] has five major sections: bibliographical information on the book, biographical/professional sketch of the author[s], a summary of the contents, the critical evaluation of the book, and the bibliography. A critical review does not mean to negatively criticize the author’s work. It is the process of reviewing a work in order to identify its strengths and its weaknesses. The following paragraphs detail the type of information needed in each section of the paper.

**Bibliographical Entry**

The bibliographical entry should contain the author[s] name[s]. If one author, it is written last name first as shown above. The title of the book should be set in italics. The city of publication, a colon, and then the name of the publisher are written next. This is followed by the year of copyright, [not the year of the latest reprint]. If the book is a second or third edition [not a reprint], that should be noted after the title. The number of pages is included, as well as the current price.

**Biographical Sketch of the Author**

The purpose of this portion of the review is to comment on the author’s (translator’s or editor’s) competence or incompetence in writing the book. The reviewer should illustrate specifically how the author’s background, academic training, vocational pursuits or other experience prepared, or failed to prepare, the author for writing the book such as details about husband, wife, children, or all schools attended is unnecessary except as those facts help the reader interpret the work.

This section should be no longer than one-half page typewritten. The student is to research the author’s background and credentials and then write up the sketch in their own words. It is not permitted to simply copy material directly from another source. Demonstrate that you have identified the reasons why this author is qualified or not to write this book.

**Summary of Contents**

Here the book critique focuses on the contents of the book. You are to give the reader of the critique a thorough introduction to “what the book is about.” This section should be no longer than two typewritten pages.

Try to make the first sentence of the summary as comprehensive and exhaustive as possible. In other words, summarize the book in one sentence. The remainder of the summary should be an elaboration of the “comprehensive sentence.” With only two pages, the review writer must concentrate on the significant and unique. It should be balanced, focusing on all major points of interest.

**Critical Evaluation**

This is by far the most important section of the book review. A “critical book review” is not merely a summary of the book’s contents; it is a critical evaluation of how the author handled the contents. Before writing your own critical book review you may want to read some critical reviews of the subject volume in professional periodicals.

This section is for the student’s reaction to the book, whether positive or negative. Examples of some questions which are often used to evaluate a book are: What was the author’s purpose? Was it achieved? Why? Why not? What was unique about the book? Were there any unusual historical, theological, or literary traits? What biases (theological, philosophical, liberal, fundamentalist, denominational, hawk, dove, etc.) are evident? What good is the book? Who ought to read it? (Please avoid the cliché, “Every sincere Christian ought to read this book.”) What can the book and author teach us? Evaluate the work on the basis of your experience and education, not just personal opinion. The author may not have been writing so you would “like” his or her work.

Remember, a critical review is written for people who have never read the book. Do not assume that the person reading the critical review knows anything about the book’s contents, the author’s point of view, or the author. You are to explain and criticize the work for everyone else. Be specific in criticisms by avoiding general statements which tell a reader nothing. The “critical evaluation” is not to exceed five typewritten pages and should not be less than three pages.

As with all formal papers, a critical book review should be well written. The following are a few stylistic suggestions for you to keep in mind:

(1) Avoid first person in formal writing.

(2) Avoid contractions in formal writing.

(3) Avoid colloquial or trite expressions.

(4) Use a dictionary.

(5) Proof-read your paper for spelling, typing, and grammatical errors.

(5) Vary the style of writing.

(6) Avoid verbosity.

(7) Organize your paper in order to avoid repetition

**Bibliography**

The last element in the critique is a bibliography. In this element the student needs to record full and accurate bibliographic data on all materials used to research the paper. (The data are similar to that used in footnotes but the form is different.) This will enable the writer to go back and continue the study at a later time. It will also make the paper valuable for other students and researchers interested in the same or a similar topic. The bibliography is placed at the end of the critical review.

**Form and Footnoting**

Form matters! Discipline is required in order to present one’s ideas in a useable form. Careful research and thinking make much more impact on the reader when presented in correct form and with a good writing style. Generally, *The Southwestern Seminary Manual of Style* (current edition) is our tool for matters of form. When quoting directly from the book being critiqued, the writer should set the quoted material off using quotation marks, and indicate the page number by inserting it between a set of parenthesis, for example (13).

In a book critique the student may choose to quote from another critique to support their argument for or against some idea in the book. The quoted statement should be as brief as possible, serving only to support the writer’s view. Such a quotation would need to be footnoted in proper form*. Do not use parenthetical references (putting a citation in the body of the paper, e.g., Kelley, 51).* Students unfamiliar with academic writing need to understand the purpose of these notes. William Campbell has given four purposes for footnotes. He has written that they may be used:

1. To amplify the ideas or information beyond the point made in the text,

2. To support statements of fact that are not common knowledge,

3. To acknowledge the source of one’s information whether quoted exactly or paraphrased or presented in substance,

4. To provide cross-reference to another part of the paper.

Footnotes accomplish the following tasks in a paper:

* Enable a reader to use the writer’s research to gain further knowledge
* Demonstrate the quality of research underlying the actual text of the paper
* Demonstrate the integrity of the writer of the paper
* Acknowledging one’s source is a matter of law [[1]](#footnote-1)

Suggestions for accurate footnoting:

* Record the source of the information as you take notes for a paper
* Cite the source in a footnote, even when re-writing or paraphrasing ideas
* Use *The Southwestern Seminary Manual of Style* for correct formatting
* Place supporting material into content footnotes

Begin early on a writing assignment. Allowing time for your thoughts to mature is an important part of effective writing. The first step in writing any formal paper is to draw up a detailed outline. Review the outline to be sure it is complete and comprehensive. Check it against the assignment to be sure it meets all the requirements. Then, write out a complete rough draft. Lay the draft aside for a while, and then come back to it. Revise the draft in order to correct spelling and grammar, form, and style. Review the draft for the quality of the arguments being made. Review the draft for completeness. Ask someone to proofread your paper, if possible.

1. Plagiarism is theft, the stealing of another’s ideas or words. Research assignments, exegeses, book critiques, etc., often require students to refer to the work of others through print or electronic media. Indeed, professors typically require students to access, understand, and, sometimes, use the research, writing, and speaking of others. Students must then know how to avoid plagiarism and how to properly reflect the student’s research and study. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)