

GUIDELINES FOR WRITING A CRITICAL BOOK REVIEW

A Book Review

Presented to

Dr. (Professor's Name)

The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for (course #)

by

Student's Name

Box # (or Student's mailing address including zip code)

Date Submitted

Rainer, Thom S. *Effective Evangelistic Churches*. Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 1996. 238 pp. \$15.95.

Introduction

Writing a five-page critical book review is not always an easy task. Space is limited, yet the essay must sufficiently address the necessary issues. The following discussion and the included suggestions are offered to facilitate your writing process and to improve your written communication. Be aware, however, that this document is secondary to direction given by the lead professor for each seminar—always be certain first to follow his specific instructions.

As you begin your review, be sure to include a complete bibliographical entry of the book being reviewed at the top of the first page (two inch margin). The entry must follow the form indicated in *The Southern Seminary Manual of Style*, and it should include the number of pages in the text reviewed and the cost of the book, if known. Please see the example above. Begin the paper with a sentence that engages or “hooks” your reader. Briefly introduce the book and the book’s author, including biographical information about the author (education, training, experience, etc.). You may also mention other matters that you deem germane to introducing the book. In most five-page reviews, you will likely need to limit the introduction to one or two paragraphs. The introduction should be approximately one half page in length.

Summary

The purpose of a critical book review is only minimally to provide a summary of the book. You may assume that the professor and the grader know the contents of the book; therefore, *the summary should be limited to one page* (approximately 23 lines of typed text).

Your goal is to provide a succinct summary that (1) provides evidence that you have read the material and that (2) tells the reader what the book is about. At this point, focus on the outline and major points of the text. Illustrate the author's argument, but do not become sidetracked with minute details in the summary. Further, avoid critique in this section, as you will have the opportunity to address such matters in the critical evaluation portion of your essay.

Given the limited amount of space in a brief book review, footnotes *should not usually be utilized*. Quotations or ideas taken directly from the text should be followed parenthetically by the page number of the quotation. The abbreviation for page(s) (p./pp.) should not be used. The following sentences are two examples of proper referencing:

1. Rainer argues that evangelistic churches should focus on reaching youth (20).
2. Indeed, he writes, "Many churches fail to recognize that adolescence is a critical time of receptivity to the gospel" (21).

Critical Evaluation

The critical evaluation section is the most important one of a book review. Your primary purpose in this section is to respond both positively and negatively to the book's content and the author's presentation. *This section should be three pages in length.*

Needless to say, this response should be more in-depth than "This book is a good book that should be recommended reading for everyone." On the other hand, "This book is a lousy book not worth reading" is also inadequate. While all books are different (and thus require somewhat differing approaches for review), the following questions may guide your evaluation:

1. What is the author's purpose, i.e., what does he/she hope to accomplish through this book? Does the author accomplish the purpose? If so, how does he/she do so? If not, why not?

2. Does the author approach the subject with any biases, i.e., do the author's theological, experiential, philosophical, denominational, or cultural perspectives influence his/her conclusions? For example, a Baptist author in America may understand the role of the Church differently than a Baptist refugee who has escaped persecution in another context.
3. What are the strengths of the book, i.e., what contributions does the book make? More specifically, why should a person read this book?
4. What are the weaknesses of the book? For example, does the author properly support his/her thesis? Does the author adequately consider and refute opposing viewpoints? Is the book limited in application to specific types of subjects? Is the book relevant to contemporary culture?

Throughout your critique, be specific in your evaluations and the arguments you make concerning the work. In your critique, demonstrate the validity of your arguments with concrete examples, clear logic, and good reasoning. Further, be sure to provide scriptural and non-scriptural evidence to support your claims where applicable.

Conclusion

In most cases, one or two paragraphs will suffice as a conclusion (*limit to one half page*). In this final section, you may use first person as you offer your overall evaluation of this text. Here are a few questions you may want to answer: Would you recommend the book to other ministers, to seminary students, or to laypersons? Why, or why not? What did you learn from this book? The goal of the conclusion is simply to end the review and to provide some application.

In conclusion, be sure to follow the current *Southern Seminary Manual of Style* (3rd ed.) and Turabian's *A Manual for Writers of Term Papers, Theses, and Dissertations* (6th ed.), as they are the accepted standards for style issues. You are expected to be familiar with both guides. Finally, review the "Common Grammatical & Stylistic Errors" document each semester before starting your paper writing. This practice will refresh you on DMin writing expectations,

sharpen your writing skills as you progress through the program each semester, and, ultimately, lead to your authoring a better doctoral project.