

Faculty Development

The Joy of Reviewing: A Short Guide to Writing Book and Media Reviews

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Book and media reviews (including reviews of Web- and computer-based educational resources) enjoy an interesting niche in the medical literature. They are commonly located toward the end of journals, right before the classified advertisements, yet are frequently the first items readers read once done with their customary cursory perusal. The reviews are ideally short and succinct, yet can be genuinely interesting for both knowledgeable experts and novices alike. From a scholastic standpoint, they exist somewhere between letters to the editor and case studies in importance and are penned by authors across the spectrum of academic rank.

Complexities of placement, style, and status of book and media reviews notwithstanding, they are firmly and importantly entrenched in the medical literature. Rarely, however, does anyone receive any formal training in writing them. Other articles have examined the skills necessary for reviewing manuscripts for possible publication, an assignment that serves the unrelated function of assessing the worthiness of submitted manuscripts.^{1,2} In this article, we examine the whys and hows of writing book and media reviews in hopes that prospective reviewers for *Family Medicine* are encouraged to undertake the task with competence and confidence.

Why Write Reviews?

Why write book reviews? Different motivations inspire readers to write book reviews, but some common themes emerge. First, writing reviews is a great way to keep abreast of developments and trends in one's own discipline.³ Second, it provides a critical synopsis of new works and helps others decide which among the myriad books published is worth reading

or buying.⁴ Third, it is a vehicle not only for informing an audience of a book's or media production's merits but also for entertaining and occasionally provoking that same audience.⁵ It allows authors an opportunity to practice creative writing skills within the medical literature while providing valuable assistance to busy medical professionals. Fourth, book reviewing can be an endeavor with which those new to medical writing can learn and hone useful skills. Finally, reviewers get to keep the book.

How to Write a Review

How does one write a book review and do it well? Is there a particular style or format most appropriate for reviews? Are there important points necessary to include in writing a high-quality review? While no one answer to any of these questions exists (unless the review is for consideration in the occasional journal that only publishes reviews in a structured outline format, unlike the more common prose format in *Family Medicine*), we believe certain general principles apply to writing sound book and media reviews.

First, reviews require structure. Whether they are written as narrative stories or matter-of-fact reportage, successful reviews include an introduction, a description of the content of the book or media presentation, an assessment of that content, and a summary of the review (including mentioning for whom the text or presentation is best suited).⁶ Ideally, as with any well-written literature, the introduction, if not the first sentence, should draw in readers, propelling them to read further while simultaneously setting the stage for the rest of the review. The best reviews engage readers from beginning to end and are praiseworthy essays in their own right.

Second, the authors have a responsibility to answer several questions in the body of the review (Table 1). There is no established formula or perfect order for answering these questions. Indeed, one of the pleasures of writing a review is planning how to incorporate such points creatively. However, several stylistic considerations are worth discussing. Reviews are frequently read by readers across disciplines, so it is important they

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Table 1

Questions to Answer When Reviewing Books or Media⁷

- What are the authors' qualifications?
- What is the intended audience?
- Is the level of writing or text appropriate for the intended audience?
- Is the information within up to date?
- Is the book or presentation logically arranged and easy to follow?
- Is the book or media resource attractively produced?
- Is the index complete and helpful?
- Are the noted references appropriate?
- If a Web-based product, is it easy to load and navigate?
- Is the price affordable or appropriate for the book or presentation?
- Are comparison books or presentations available?
- Is the book enjoyable to read? Is the presentation enjoyable to view?
- Is it worth the investment of time and money?

be informative and understandable. Depth is crucial in providing substance for those knowledgeable about the reviewed subject matter; breadth is critical in giving context to those readers less well informed.

Third, keep in mind that while book and media reviews are essentially personal opinions, they must also factually report on substantive content. Too much of one or the other may result in reviews either so idiosyncratic as to be unimportant or so cut-and-dried as to be downright boring. Given that the effort put forth in writing a book or producing a media presentation is considerable, criticism (while welcome and encouraged) is best leveled when substantiated with supporting evidence and presented in a civil and thoughtful manner.^{4,5}

High-quality reviews acknowledge efforts, respect differences, and give true meaning to the phrase "fair and balanced." Keeping these maxims in mind, writers can easily meet the expectations of journal editors and fulfill their bottom-line responsibilities: to read the book, be timely in writing, and offer guidance to readers.⁸

Fourth, authors of reviews should be aware of several situations that occasionally get in the way of writing good reviews. Writers should try to avoid these literary traps, which are noted in Table 2. Potential writers should decline to review works completed by either close friends or mortal enemies and any in which writers might have vested financial or political interests in their success or failure.¹¹

Table 2

Traps to Avoid in Writing Reviews^{9,10}

Do not:

- Describe what the author should have written
- Critique out of your range of knowledge
- Take one part of the book out of context and thus selectively distort the review
- Review without reading or understanding
- Use reviews to extol your own ideas or show that you know more than the author
- Fail to note either what the book is about or how it fits into the existing literature on the subject
- Plagiarize from the book or media presentation
- Submit a review before a colleague has read and critiqued it for content and grammar

Final Comment

Ultimately, writing book and media reviews is both personally and educationally rewarding. It can be a joy. We encourage readers to consider enlisting their skills in the worthwhile task of reviewing, using this guide for direction toward achieving success. In the process, reviewers will advance their own knowledge, enhance their skills of critical analysis and commentary, and help provide a needed service to their colleagues.

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