

CME Article

Effective Medical Writing

Pointers to getting your article published

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Writing a book review

ABSTRACT

A book review is a form of academic writing that provides a succinct yet critical analysis evaluating the content, style, merit and significance of a book. The reader should gain insight into the strengths and weaknesses of the book, aided by input from the reviewer. The four stages of writing a book review are: introducing the book, outlining its contents, highlighting parts of the book by selecting particular chapters or themes, and giving a detailed evaluation.

Keywords: book analysis, book review, medical writing, scientific paper

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INTRODUCTION

A book review is a special form of academic writing and can be defined as an analysis of a book based on content, style and merit. It provides a summary of a book that includes a critique of the work. Book reviews are often published in newspapers, magazines and on the internet, and cover diverse topics such as literary works of fiction, biographies, history and even poetry. The length of such reviews may vary from a single paragraph to a substantial essay, depending on the individual publication and reviewer style.

Many biomedical journals publish book reviews. Although they are regarded as non-scientific material, book reviews do contribute to the journal's character, and provide a useful service to its readers.⁽¹⁾ As the policy regarding the source and types of books to be reviewed, invitation of book reviewers, length of reviews and peer-review varies among different journals, it is useful to carefully study the target journal's Instructions to Authors beforehand. Most books for review are sent to the journal from publishers or authors.

A few journals invite suggestions for books to be reviewed from readers. Some journals will also include reviews of multimedia. The Editor makes a decision as to whether a particular book is suitable and relevant for the journal. In some journals, there is a dedicated Book Review Editor. The length of book reviews is typically short, ranging from 100 to 1,000 words, and seldom exceeds one journal page in length.

For most journals that publish book reviews, the reviews are usually commissioned, although some journals may also consider unsolicited reviews. Many journals welcome proposals for book review but suggest that potential reviewers discuss with the editorial office prior to submitting a review. Other journals seek volunteers who are willing to help in reviewing books and add them to a book reviewer list. The person writing the review should be familiar with the subject matter and is expected to offer an objective and unbiased critique of the book. For biomedical journals, book reviewers are usually experts in their respective fields, although juniors, such as house officers, research assistants or even students with the right aptitude and breadth of perspective, have been able to produce good reviews.^(2,3)

A skilled reviewer is a valuable asset to the journal editor, as he would have not only read and scrutinised the text, but would also produce a review that gives the reader confidence in his perception of the book. The reviewer is expected to make a judgement on the adequacy of the topics covered in the book and the authenticity of its contents, and comment on the validity of the author's points. The reviewed book is also expected to be compared to other materials in the same category. On being invited, book reviewers should take a look at recent issues of the journal to get an idea of the type, scope and style of previously published book reviews. Most journals follow the time-honoured tradition of allowing the book reviewer to keep the copy of the book sent to him for review.

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CONTENTS OF A BOOK REVIEW

Hartley describes four stages of writing a book review, namely: (1) Introduce the book; (2) Outline the contents of the book; (3) Highlight parts of the book; and (4) Evaluate the book.⁽⁴⁾ Book reviews should have most, if not all, of these components present, even if they are not always given in the order listed. Some reviewers, for example, prefer to start from stage 4 – evaluation – then move to stages 1–3, and finally conclude by justifying their original opening evaluation.⁽⁴⁾

Box 1. Four stages of writing a book review [adapted from Hartley⁽⁴⁾]:

1. Introduce the book by:
 - Outlining the general topic.
 - Indicating who the book is for.
 - Placing the book in its field.
2. Outline the contents of the book by:
 - Giving a general view of its organisation.
 - Stating the topic of each chapter/section.
3. Highlight parts of the book by:
 - Selecting particular chapters or themes for evaluation.
 - Critiquing the argument of the book.
4. Evaluate the book by:
 - Commenting on aspects of the content.
 - Indicating how it meets the readers' needs.
 - Remarking on its format, price and value for money.
 - Making recommendations for purchase or otherwise.

Before actually reading the book, there are a few things to be done.^(4,5) A suggested way to begin is by just looking at the book and examining its physical attributes. Is it a hard or soft cover? What sort of binding has been used? Is the cover well-illustrated and does it indicate what the book contents would be about? How is it categorised by the publisher? Are there blurbs included on the dust jacket? Get a general feel by flipping through its pages. How are the chapters arranged? How about the paper quality, page design, layout, and font type and size? How about the illustrations, including figures, graphs, diagrams and tables? Does the book look readable and user-friendly? How has the author structured the book?⁽⁵⁾

In the preliminary reading of the book, many reviewers take notes. These notes should include possible key findings, controversial statements, effective passages for quoting and impressions formed. Reviewers should select and allow time to assimilate and think about the information that would be relevant to the four-stage writing

procedure outlined in Box 1. Experienced reviewers have a framework for taking notes, as looking for specific points helps keep the reviewer focused. Start with the simpler items before moving on to more complex tasks.^(4,5) Above all, keep in mind the need for achieving a single impression which must be made clear to the reader.

STRUCTURE OF A BOOK REVIEW

A book review should contain essential information about the book, to ensure that readers who are interested in obtaining a copy of the book can do so easily. This information is typically placed at the beginning of the book review.

Box 2. Essential information to be provided in a book review:

- Accurate details of the authors'/editors' names and initials.
- Title of the book.
- Edition.
- Date of publication.
- Publisher and place of publication.
- ISBN number.
- Format (hardback, paperback or soft cover).
- Number of pages.
- Price.
- Webpage (if available).

Box 3. Checklist for book reviewers [adapted from Hartley⁽⁴⁾]:

Make sure that the review contains:

- An early paragraph stating what the book is about, and putting it in context.
- Information about the intended audience.
- A critique of the argument/content of the book.
- Remarks on the strengths and limitations of the book.
- A note on the format, length and price (or value for money).
- A note (if appropriate) on how well the text is supported by tables/diagrams/illustrations.
- Any supporting references.
- Try to make your review readable and entertaining.

Reviewers should try to provide a description, not just a simple summary of the book. The descriptive account of the contents of a book can often be woven into the critical remarks. While a critical review is a statement of opinion, it must be a considered judgement that includes a statement of the reviewer's understanding of the author's purpose, how well the reviewer feels

the author's purpose has been achieved, and evidence to support the reviewer's judgement of the author's achievement.

Typically, the review should begin with a paragraph that mentions the type of book being reviewed, and what the book is about. Identify the author, title and the author's purpose in writing the book. Does the preface or foreword state the author's purpose, background and credentials? Doing research on the author and incorporating what is found may give the review more depth. Identify the main topic or problem addressed. Show how the work relates to a discipline, profession, particular audience, or to other works on the topic. Make sure that the target audience for the book is clearly identified. Provide an overview of the book.

A systematic evaluation of the book is the heart of the book review. The following points should be included: How clearly was the book written? Did the author achieve his goal? What are the author's most important points? List at least two examples of how the author proved or did not prove points he was trying to make. Reviewers should list their critical evaluation of the book contents, explain the rationale for taking certain positions, provide the criteria for which those positions are based, and remark on the strengths and limitations of the book. If possible, use one paragraph for each point about the book, as it is a good way to emphasise the importance of the point. These main points should be listed in the notes taken before beginning the review.

Besides evaluating the actual contents of the book, good reviewers should be able to point out whether there were important omissions from the book, i.e. what should have been included but was not, and compare the book with others on the same subject. Reviewers can describe their own personal experiences relating to the subject of the book, but should also make sure that their personal views are distinguished from those of the author. Reviewers should state what they like or dislike about the author's writing style. A few short quotes from the book can be used to illustrate certain points. Quoted material should be placed in quotation marks or indented, and properly footnoted. Although this practice is not absolutely necessary, it is a good way to give the reader a sense of the author's writing style. The review should not merely describe what the book is about, but more importantly, explain how the reviewer feels about the book and why. A good review should express the reviewer's opinion and persuade the reader to share it, to read the book, or to avoid reading it. If there is something in the book that can be changed, state what it would be.

If there are tables, diagrams, images or other illustrations, it is appropriate to comment on these and on how well they complement the text. Any supporting references should be

provided at the end of the review. A note should be made on the format, length and price (or value for money). Finally, try to tie together any issues raised in the review and give a global evaluation of the reviewer's appreciation and the possible usefulness of the book. State whether you, as a reviewer, would recommend this book to someone else. Reviewers should try to make the book review readable and entertaining. It is recommended to write in the first person, and to try imagining the reader as a friend to whom you are telling a story. There is no set formula, but a general rule of thumb is that approximately one-half to two-thirds of the review should summarise the author's main ideas, while the remainder of the report should evaluate the book.

Box 4. Common problems with book reviews [adapted from Hartley⁽⁴⁾]:

- Uninformative, indecisive and boring.
- A mere listing of the contents.
- Pretentious, unkind and careless.
- Personally abusive about the author's credentials.
- Written to boost the reviewer's ego.

SUMMARY

A book review is a form of academic writing that provides a succinct yet critical analysis evaluating the content, style, merit and significance of a book. The reader should gain insight into the strengths and weaknesses of the book, aided by input from the reviewer. The review should help the reader in deciding whether the book is worth reading and purchasing.

Box 5. Take-home points:

A book review should:

- Give readers a balanced yet critical evaluation of the book contents.
- Be succinct, analytical and informative.
- Provide insight into the strengths and weaknesses of the book.
- Help readers decide whether or not the book is worth reading and buying.

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SINGAPORE MEDICAL COUNCIL CATEGORY 3B CME PROGRAMME
Multiple Choice Questions (Code SMJ 201009A)

	True	False
Question 1. The purpose of a book review is to:		
(a) Comment on a previously published article.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
(b) Provide a critical analysis of the contents and merits of a book.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
(c) Report a case with unique diagnostic features.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
(d) Describe a technical innovation.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Question 2. The four stages of a book review include:		
(a) Introducing the book.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
(b) Outlining its contents.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
(c) Highlighting parts of the book.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
(d) Providing an extensive list of references.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Question 3. A book review should provide information about:		
(a) Who the publishers are.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
(b) Why the author wrote the book.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
(c) Who the target audience is.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
(d) How clever the reviewer is.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Question 4. Regarding journal policy on book reviews:		
(a) All medical journals publish book reviews.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
(b) The majority of book reviews are commissioned.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
(c) Book reviews are typically 5–8 journal pages in length.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
(d) Some journals have a Book Review Editor.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Question 5. The following statements about a book review are true:		
(a) They provide insight into the strengths and weaknesses of a book.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
(b) Sometimes, segments of the book are quoted.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
(c) It should ideally be readable and entertaining.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
(d) One should never comment on the price of the book.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Doctor's particulars:

Name in full: _____

MCR number: _____ Specialty: _____

Email address: _____

SUBMISSION INSTRUCTIONS:(1) Log on at the SMJ website: <http://www.sma.org.sg/cme/smj> and select the appropriate set of questions. (2) Select your answers and provide your name, email address and MCR number. Click on "Submit answers" to submit.**RESULTS:**(1) Answers will be published in the SMJ November 2010 issue. (2) The MCR numbers of successful candidates will be posted online at www.sma.org.sg/cme/smj by 15 November 2010. (3) All online submissions will receive an automatic email acknowledgment. (4) Passing mark is 60%. No mark will be deducted for incorrect answers. (5) The SMJ editorial office will submit the list of successful candidates to the Singapore Medical Council.**Deadline for submission: (September 2010 SMJ 3B CME programme): 12 noon, 8 November 2010.**