

HINTS ON WRITING A CRITICAL BOOK REVIEW by Walter B. Shurden

A Critical Book Review

Submitted to Dr. (Instructor's Name)

Carolina Graduate School of Divinity

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Course

(Course Title)

by

Mortimer B. Smarty

(Date)

## I. BIBLIOGRAPHICAL ENTRY

Shurden, Walter B., Hints on Writing A Critical Book Review. Nashville, TN: Broadman, 1972.  
268 pp. \$3.50

## II. BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH OF AUTHOR

This section should be *no longer* than one-half typewritten page. The purpose of this section of the review is to demonstrate the author's (translator or editor) competency or incompetency in writing the book. Illustrate *specifically* how the author's background, academic training, vocational pursuits or some such prepared, or failed to prepare, his/her for writing the book.

You need not go into detail about husband, wife, children, or *all* schools attended, except as those facts help one to interpret the book. The idea is to help the reader of your review understand the book by explaining the author of the book. *One half page!*

## III. SUMMARY OF CONTENTS

This section should be *no longer* than two (2) typewritten pages. Your purpose here is to focus on the contents of the book. Give the reader of your review a thorough introduction to "what the book is about."

A good rule to follow: Try to make the first sentence of your summary as comprehensive and exhaustive as possible. In other words, *summarize the book in one sentence*. The remainder of your summary should be an elaboration of the "comprehensive sentence."

One common weakness in this section is that students summarize the first half of the book, begin to run out of space (2 pages!) and then slight the latter half of the book. Do not do it! Carefully and logically organize your summary. Be sure you have a balanced summary, focusing on *all major* points of interest.

Another common weakness in the "summary of contents" section is bogging down in minute details. Your aim is to introduce the reader to the forest, not to each individual tree. You have only two pages; concentrate on the significant and unique; omit the less significant.

## IV. 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. Here one is to react to the book positively and negatively. Because all books, like people, are different, one can never impose a predetermined set of critical questions on the book.

Examples of some questions, however, 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? Any unusual historical, theological or literary traits? What biases (theological, philosophical, liberal, fundamentalist, denominational, hawk, dove, etc.) are evident? [Before you critique the *author's* biases, be sensitive to where *your own* may lie also!] 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?

The “critical evaluation” is not to exceed five (5) pages in length! Before writing a critical book review, you may wish to read some critical reviews in professional periodicals; however, *if you cite such a review in your paper, you must document the citation with either a footnote or an endnote.*

Remember that a critical review is written for people who have never read the book. So take nothing for granted. Do not assume that your reader knows anything about the book’s contents, the author’s point of view or the author. Imagine that you are the only person who has read the book; your job is to explain it and to criticize it for everyone else.

*Be specific* in your criticisms. Avoid general statements which tell one nothing. Example: One student, in reviewing Roland Bainton’s classic biography of Martin Luther, wrote, “Bainton defended Luther’s action against the Roman Catholic Church.” If Bainton, in fact, did that, it is an important observation. But *how* did he? Be specific! Illustrate with particular details citing in parenthesis, where appropriate, the specific pages from the book which support your assertions.

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 excessive use of the first person in formal writing. While the use of the first person in formal writing is no longer considered the *faux pas* it once was, it should be avoided when possible. (2) Avoid contractions in formal writing. Again, while this is no longer regarded as a serious offense, the writer should be conscious of the informal usage. (3) Be careful not to “split infinitives.” Example: “to carefully scrutinize the thesis of this author. . . .” Remember, an infinitive, such as “to scrutinize” is to be regarded as *one word* in English and is *never* to be split with intervening words. (4) Avoid colloquial or trite expressions. Example: “The author begins by saying . . . ,” “The author says first of all . . .” or “Every seminary student should read this book.” (5) Use a dictionary. Dictionaries are inexpensive; therefore, spelling errors are without excuse! While typing errors may occur even with the most careful of typists, spelling errors indicate sloppy or lazy work. To avoid typing errors, read your paper *backwards*. (6) Vary style of writing. Begin sentences differently; use some simple and some complex sentences. Good writing has a certain style. (7) Avoid *verbosity*. If you do not know what that is, look it up, and then do not forget it. Avoid verbiage! (8) Organize your paper so as to avoid repetition. The “As I said previously . . .” sentence does not have to be written if you organize your material *before* you begin writing. (9) For other matters regarding style, *consult the style guide adopted for your particular institution!* For 📖📖📖, it is *A Manual for Writers of Term Papers, Theses, and Dissertations*, 6th edition, by Kate L. Turabian.

This paper is not an infallible guide for writing a critical book review. Only “hints” are presented here. The “infallible guide” is always the professor and his/her instructions. Careful attention to what the particular professor wants is always a first order of academic business. In other words, know what the directions are. Then follow them.