

# **How to Write a Book Review**

## **(or: Book Reviews in Academic Journals)**

### **General background**

Academic reviews comprise an independent category of academic literature and are produced primarily in the humanities and social sciences.

In a similar way to literary reviews (found in the culture section of newspapers), academic reviews discuss written works (commonly books or, occasionally, articles), in turn, in written form.

The aim of a review is to give the reader:

- (1) an overview of the content of the reviewed work,
- (2) an integration into the academic discourse, and
- (3) a critical statement of opinion.

Reviews are designed to make it easier for the reader to obtain an overview of an academic topic.

**A book review always begins with the details of the book: surname and given name of author, year of publication, complete title, place of publication, publisher, ISBN and price.**

### **The three elements of a book review**

#### **1. Contextualisation**

The reviewed work should be placed in the context of existing research. Relevant questions are:

Which discussion does the work build on?

From which tradition / perspective / theoretical approach does the author argue? To which specialist problem does the study respond?

Does it stand in continuity to earlier works, with which it associates itself (either by differentiating, building on or simply confirming)?

#### **2. Overview of content**

Short summary of the text, similar to a table of contents. A book review is not a presentation of the original text. A brief summary is, therefore, sufficient. If particular points are criticised, this part can be presented in more detail, for example with the use of quotations.

#### **3. Statement of opinion**

The statement of opinion does not offer personal preferences or a criticism of the author as a person (in other words, do not become a second Marcel Reich Ranicki). The opinion relates to the facts and the way they are presented.

The following questions are helpful for the statement of opinion:

Which questions remain unanswered? What are the limitations of the work? Which theories/statements are contradictory or require further discussion? Was the work a meaningful development for the context? Have the arguments in the work been clearly expressed?

## **Writing a book review**

When writing a book review, it makes sense to observe the order of the three steps described above. Above all, the unbiased summary should be distinguishable from the statement of opinion.

Which writing style should be used? As it is an academic review and not a literary one, the writing style should be adapted to the academic context. Sometimes, book reviews are published in journals that do not always have a purely academic audience. In such cases, an essayistic form is suitable.

The style common to the culture section of newspapers is fostered in literary criticism, because the presentation of the reviewer plays an important role. In the case of academic reviews, by contrast, the (linguistic) presentation is rather of secondary importance.

## **Review possibilities:**

### **Berliner Journal für Soziologie**

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## Appendix: Two assessments of the review system

### 1. On duty and freedom of choice in reviewing

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(These reflections emerged from debates between the editors of IASLonline and [LiRez – Literaturwissenschaftliche Rezensionen](#).)

#### Duties of a book review

1. The foundation and starting point of the range of duties of an academic book review is the **duty to report**, in accordance with which the review is obliged to introduce the book to the reader: in its objectives, arrangement (structure, line of argument) and findings. The type of publication (specialist book, non-fiction book, career-path study or freely chosen monograph, textbook) and its intended audience (academics, students, wider range of interested parties) should also be mentioned.

In a situation of increasing complexity, in which we can now independently acquire excerpts from specialist discussions, the duty to report is a matter of great importance and responsibility: it creates a state of information that is no longer primarily based on reading the literature itself.

A review has failed if, at the end of it, you know what the reviewer thinks of the matter at hand but the contents of the reviewed work remain unclear. In some cases, the reviewer conceives of an entirely different work, which he had wished for instead of the reviewed work.

2. The report and the evaluation are often connected by a critical **reflection on the methodological approach** and/or comments on the **sources** used, their analysis and criticism. The methodological approach ought to be characterised and also assessed against the current horizon of the discussion of methods. A work that does not identify its own methods is not immune against a methodological critique – on the contrary, it is important to take a closer look here. Source criticism is called for above all in the case of historical works, but it can also relate to the philological foundations (editions used etc.).
3. The duty to **evaluate** has several dimensions: First of all, the work should be measured against its own specifications (objectives, hypotheses). In a further step, the specifications of the reviewed work should be placed in the context of the relevant specialist discussion (state of knowledge, problem at hand). In addition, it can be asked how the findings appear against the backdrop of the – constitutively scant – academic resources of a subject area or discipline. The closing of a ‘research gap’ is not necessarily always worth the effort devoted to it.
4. As every work is an event in specialist communication, the reviewed work ultimately has to be placed, at least roughly speaking, in the context of the **specialist discourse**. In ‘soft disciplines’, this is somewhat difficult; it can, however, be operationalised in questions

such as: To which specialist academic problem does this study respond? Does it stand in continuity to earlier works, with which it associates itself (either by differentiating, building on or simply confirming)? Or does it open up a particular discussion space for the first time?

The reviewer might ask himself which specialist follow-up communication he considers appropriate. At this point, the review can assume a performative and prospective character, that is, by suggesting supplementary or additional questions.

There will be agreement on these points, and likewise the requirement of short reviews, above all, to fulfil the duty to report. The experience of IASLonline shows that longer reviews become independent research contributions if they address all other points. IASLonline fosters this type of text.

### **Edited collections**

Before I address the freestyle programme, a few words on reviewing edited collections: they increasingly become a problem the more they exhaust themselves in a 'bookbinder' synthesis. Should one review them at all? If so, in summary, restricted to the most important (successful, allowing for further work, innovative) contributions or article for article? Whoever is interested in correlations between problems and arguments will only want to see the intellectual substance extracted and be spared the 'padding' generated by the machinery of conferences. The limitations on scope caused by printing accommodated this idea. As long as reviews were published in IASL, the editors acted in accordance with this motto.

It was difficult, however, to enforce and maintain it. Can one expect the reviewer to make up for what the conference organisers and editors have neglected to do: arrange a problem area, place the contributions within it and link them to each other in terms of arguments? Who would not praise any reviewer for doing this? However, one can neither expect him to do this work nor always assume that he possesses the required (often multidisciplinary) knowledge.

Limitations on scope cease to exist in the case of e-publications. It is now quite conceivable (and occasionally put into practice) that each and every contribution is introduced and briefly characterised. Such a review will only be read in its entirety by someone with a particular interest in the topic. Yet there is added value for those with scattered interests: if section headings and an (internally linked) table of contents make it easier for the reader to orientate himself, he should be able with little effort to separate the wheat from the chaff. No one can foresee what might interest and inspire other readers today and the same reader tomorrow. (The only thing that helps here is playing dumb: bibliographies that open up sources often record things that have absolutely no information value given the current horizon of the problem.)

### **Subjectivisation**

The freestyle programme comprises free forms of presentation that in the case of a book review – unlike with figure skating – can be realised together with the obligatory part in a single text. As these expressive elements are at odds with the obligatory tasks, there is constant friction. What are these elements?

They are composed of stylistic devices that allow the author to express himself in the text as a person with his opinions, moods and preferences and which aim to arouse an interest in the text beyond the subject-specific information. Irony and sarcasm, interjections, rhetorical questions or asides to the reader are some of these stylistic devices. One can talk of 'subjectivisation' (*Feuilletonisierung*), because the subjectivity of the culture section of newspapers avails itself of

such devices, in order to appeal to a different and mixed readership. If a cultural tone is discernible in academic reviews, the texts attain elements of staging or an event; there is emotionality and communicability; in a word: life.

In the strict discipline of academic communication, all of this is excluded as subjective, in accordance with the insights of systems theory: people (humans, individuals) are not part of academic communication but instead belong to its environment. In this sense, 'subjectivisation' means to treat in a playful way the boundary between academia and its environment (to which humans belong, as do the areas of education, economics, politics, etc.), without crossing it and performing a change of systems. In terms of systems theory, a re-entry takes place with the 'subjectivisation': a differentiation of the academic system from its environment is copied into its own communication.

If a reviewer incorporates personal traits into his text, he is provoking a personal reaction from others, the reviewed author or the reader: the text has the potential for conflict. In such a conflict, to which reviews lend themselves due to their explicit evaluations, harsh judgements can be made. To characterise an output, for instance, as 'unnecessary' and 'superfluous' for scholarship is, in my opinion, legitimate. However, the **ethics of academic communication** exclude value judgements aimed exclusively at the author's person. If a reviewer determines that something was overlooked in a study, he is not permitted to ascribe this to the 'thoughtlessness', 'mental deficiency', 'complacency' or 'laziness' of the individual academic. A well-known borderline case is the attribute 'naïve', because even where it constitutes a clear reference to the text, it refers back to the mental capacity of the person responsible for that text. As boundaries – system boundaries between academia and its environment – play a constitutive role here, they are supported by maxims of professional ethics.

Such a 'subjectivisation' has the advantage of addressing readers who are not only or not primarily interested in the subject-specific information, of stimulating debate, also on a personal level, and in this way making the topic more interesting for a narrow as well as a wider audience. In this way, it serves the attention-grabbing presentation of scholarship and the successful communication of its results both in the field and beyond. It would be a bad thing for academic communication if the 'subjectivisation' were to impair the specialist information. The culture section of the large newspapers proves that this is not (or at least not necessarily) the case. Conversely, the worst thing that can happen to academia in its internal and external presentation is the spreading of boredom. Communication cannot be maintained without follow-up communication.

Academics possess the 'what', that is, the specialist knowledge, but they still have much to learn regarding the 'how' of communication, its form of presentation or dissemination. The culture section of newspapers is a good school for writing factual texts. IASOnline has drawn some conclusions from it for editing book reviews: we orientate the reader by means of main headings and section headings, break up longer passages with new paragraphs, so that the reader can comfortably grasp the text on the screen ('scannability'). A 'subjectivisation' of writing style is not promoted by the editors; we did not set strict limits, however, and observe that online communication encourages a freer, 'cheekier', terser and pithier writing posture – and this occasionally results in (also personal) controversy.

**2. Günter Mey (December 2000). Editorial Note: Why Write Reviews? or: Why Reviews Should be Independent Contributions. *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung / Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, vol. 1 (3).**

Available at: <http://qualitative-research.net/fqs.htm> [18 April 2002].

**Summary:** This contribution will first outline the potentials that can be associated with reviews. These include, first and foremost, the possibility to open up discourses by means of reviews, provided they extend beyond a descriptive discussion of media items; in this way, they can be assigned a function that normally seems to be reserved for treatises. The fact that reviews rarely fulfil this function, however, can be partly traced back to existing restrictions in the context of print publications. To this can be added received academic standards, according to which reviews are not infrequently regarded as contributions of inferior quality. Taking these thoughts as a starting point, it will be made clear that in view of the unique properties of the Internet – especially the flexibility with regard to available space, publication dates and forms of presentation, as well as the possibility of a direct exchange, for instance via discussion forums – an increased appreciation of reviews appears possible and reasonable.

## 1. Preliminary remarks

Since the appearance of the second issue of *FQS* in June 2000, the section *FQS*-Review has become an integral part of the journal. On the occasion of the first reviews and review articles, published in volume 2, I wrote a short **editorial note**, though more in the sense of a ‘salutation’. I would like to use the publication of the newest issue to present some of the potentials, problems and perspectives related to this section in a more fundamental and detailed way. In this sense, I hope that the reviews and review articles published in this volume provide a selection that will arouse your interest and take a first step in the direction outlined above.

## 2. Why read reviews? Why write reviews?

Reviews may serve first and foremost to draw attention to new media items (books, CD-ROMs, etc.) and to orientate readers in the academic sector in view of the rising number of publications. In this sense, reviews address different categories of people: for the authors or editors of a media item, it might be particularly important for their work to be publicised in the academic community; for the publisher, it is likely important first and foremost that this particular media item asserts itself (over competitors) on the market (which requires visibility); and the readers of reviews might be especially keen to be informed about interesting new releases and given a recommendation for what they should buy (or at least read). As the book review editor, I am in touch with these three categories of interested party, and I make an effort to consider them accordingly. At the same time, I have my own interest, one that appears to be particularly significant to me as the author of reviews: that reviews are written in such a way that they promote additional perspectives and, perhaps, even open up new academic discourses. The last-named understanding goes hand in hand with the realisation that reviews should, ideally, be more than mere *reproductions* of contents in favour of a constructively critical examination of the respective media item embedded in the relevant research context. From this emphatic perspective, reviews and review articles ought to fulfil three functions:

- *Content presentation:* The reader should be provided with initial insights into the content and topics addressed by the media item. This involves clarifying the (explicit or implicit) objectives pursued by the media item and the intended (narrow or wide) audience.
- *Evaluation:* The review should also contain a critical appraisal of the reviewed work, that is, it should make clear to the reader, as far as possible, the extent to which the objectives pursued by the media item are fulfilled. The review should furthermore – also in order to allow for the unfurling of this critical appraisal in the first place – provide ...

- *Contextualisation*, that is, an *introduction* to and *analysis* of a field of research. This means that the achievements of the reviewed media item are appraised in relation to the relevant field of research and the points that have gone unfulfilled are clearly highlighted. The opportunity provided by the media item, therefore, is to be exploited not only to introduce the readers to a subject area or field of research but also to demonstrate / critically point out the difficulties and opportunities for development in this field (it is particularly important here to differentiate in the text between the reviewed work and the person of the reviewer). This requires at least a rudimentary discussion of the state of research (in an area) alongside the media item in question (by understanding the media item as a ‘representative’ of the field of research) – a requirement that necessitates that the reviewer be ‘at home’ in the subject area and can (and wants to) adopt clear positions. In my view, it should be the long-term aim of a journal like *FQS* – which regards itself as a forum (for information and exchange) – to receive and publish reviews and review articles that fulfil these requirements. [1] Unfortunately, reviews do not always have this focus, as shorter reviews (also in *FQS*) limit themselves to presenting the contents more or less in summary and review *articles* go beyond this but sometimes embed the media item in the relevant field of research in a merely cursory manner. Since I – as co-editor of *FQS* – have been performing the function of book review editor, two questions arising from the aforementioned observations have occupied me:

1. Why is it rare that reviews, but also review articles, appropriately take into account the three aforementioned functions?
2. Why have reviews and review articles such a tough time, for it has become clear, also in *FQS*, that they – compared to other contributions – are viewed or downloaded less often.

Both these points contrast not only with the possibilities shown earlier offered by a review for stimulating a discussion; furthermore, the aforementioned hopes and expectations of authors and editors, as well as publishers, are only partially fulfilled, as the media items are less noticed via reviews than desired.

### 3. Some reasons for the difficulties experienced by reviews

It seems to me that *at least* three – partially related – reasons are particularly worth mentioning in relation to the limited visibility of reviews:

- With few exceptions, [2] reviews in many journals lead a rather shadowy existence; generally, only a few and then predominantly very short reviews are to be found. This is, to some extent, a result of the restrictions placed on them due to the space available in journals, and very strict (character and word count) guidelines are issued accordingly by the journal editors. I attribute the fact that some reviews in *FQS* are brief and only reproduce content to many reviewers having so far been socialised by publishing in print media (and having internalised the danger that lengthy reviews are often not accepted by journals or only when the space available as a result of a compilation of a particular issue allows it: I have often personally experienced the postponement of – especially – reviews from one issue to another; on occasion, more than a year passed between the completion of the review and its publication).
- Shaped perhaps by these experiences, the view has prevailed that as a rule nothing more should be expected from a review than a discussion dealing alone with the volume itself. Perhaps those reviews that are written as articles and treatises are (now) only expected in the few organs (established and specialised in reviews) such as *Contemporary Psychology*. Their five-page guidelines for reviewers state: ‘Do not abstract the book. Talk about it and in doing so indicate the range and nature of its content.’ (p. 1) [3]



- Finally, I would like to mention a third, serious difficulty, namely the fact that the composition of reviews – compared with other publishing activities – is not particularly acknowledged within the academic community. This became clear to me when a colleague indignantly remarked that someone had ‘dared’ to include book reviews in his list of publications as part of a job application. In addition, reviews are generally not taken into consideration in evaluations for budget allocations: thus, in a current ‘Record of Output Data in Research and Teaching’ at the Technical University of Berlin, book reviews are not even listed. A member of the committee tasked with the evaluation commented in response to my enquiry that although the question of whether reviews can be regarded as ‘output (data)’ had been controversially discussed, the committee had eventually concluded that reviews cannot be recognised as such (and should, therefore, not be ‘rewarded’ with points) because in a review the author ‘only’ deals with the work of another. My conversation partner added that an academic should write his/her own works instead of ‘reporting’ on the works of others. Such attitudes completely fail to take into consideration that fact that reviews are not always written in the form of brief reproductions of content and can therefore have a *value* in and of themselves, as invoked by *Contemporary Psychology*: ‘CP reviews are not infrequently cited as sources of ideas.’ (op. cit., p. 2)

Against this backdrop, it should come as no surprise that a cycle has been opened that leads to reviews appearing, in comparison with other academic output, to be not only not worth writing in the way suggested above, but also that the writing of reviews appears to be almost detrimental, because in the same amount of time an independent (credited and rewarded) contribution can be written (especially as selection committees are often in the habit of discounting the reviews included by applicants in lists of publications, though this is a ‘mild’ response – the harsher variation is to use the listing of reviews as an argument *against* the applicant).

#### 4. Supplementary considerations

Alongside the aforementioned potentials that are due above all to the unique properties of the Internet and can help to change the composition of reviews and in this way upgrade them, additional variations are conceivable. *At present*, I see three perspectives here: (a) multiple reviews of one media item, (b) the review of ‘classics’ and other older (less well-known) media items, as well as (c) annotated reprints of previously published reviews. I would like to briefly elaborate on these three suggestions, in order to illustrate how reviews – understood as treatises providing a critical introduction to a field of research using the example of a media item – can open up discourses in the sense of statements of opinion or positions. *Multiple reviews* are, for instance, possible if we incorporate in *FQS* reviews of certain media items from print journals that cooperate with us. By publishing different reviews of a single media item, we hope to make it clear that reviews can also (and especially) constitute an individual interpretation, that is, contain opinions written from a given position (whether it be that of an individual, a discipline or a particular school of thought). The objective of such an approach is – like comments in a forum – to reflect the range of responses and representations related to a given media item. The idea to publish not only reviews of current media items but also, little by little, to incorporate reviews of (in some cases much) older media items has a similar objective, namely to make it clear that every media item / book has or can have its own reception history. For this reason, we regard two approaches as conceivable: alongside the new review of so-called classics (and such media items that might become classics, but have hitherto received little attention), (much) older review publications could also be included as reprints, supplemented by an annotation by the reviewer/s from today’s perspective. With both forms of reconsideration, one could convey and put up for debate how and also why (formerly positive or negative) evaluations can be modified as (academic) history progresses or even be reversed. Many of the efforts outlined in this editorial note, by means of which we seek to contribute to an increased appreciation of reviews in order to utilise their potential for academic discourses will require time and, especially, the support of all parties involved with *FQS*, that is, authors/editors of media items, reviewers and readers. Without their active participation, it will not be possible to fully exploit the potentials offered by an online journal, which would ultimately mean limiting oneself to being the electronic variation of an offline medium.

## Notes

[1] Though review articles are more orientated than short reviews to the *evaluation* and *contextualisation* function.

[2] In the German-speaking world, the exceptions include the journal *Handlung Kultur Interpretation*, in which review articles are understood and requested as a critical dialogue between disciplines; an example in the English-speaking world would be *Culture & Psychology*.

[3] These guidelines are not accessible for the public; they are sent to reviewers as instructions for their work.