

The Assignment

Book Review in Rhetoric, Composition, and Writing Studies

Assignment Overview

Write a ~1,500-word book review of a single title of interest to you in rhetoric, composition, and writing studies. Although the title you examine must be published in this explicit discipline, I encourage you to find books that speaks to your graduate concentration or potential future professional interests. Generally, publishable reviews examine a monograph published in the last four years.

Writing a review of a recent book in writing studies aids you in learning the scholarly conventions required of publication as well as learning more about an important subfield in English Studies: you will have an opportunity to send your review out for publication, and through the process, learn more about the field and research within it.

To find a title, take a look at the websites of some influential scholarly presses in the field:

- [CCCC Studies in Writing and Rhetoric](#)
- [Parlor Press, Writing Program Administration Series](#)
- [Southern Illinois University Press, Studies in Rhetorics and Feminisms and Series](#)
- [Utah State University Press](#)
- [WAC Clearinghouse/Colorado State University Open Press](#) (free book downloads here)

Content

Regardless of where you hope to publish, it is important to remember that the purpose of a book review is to summarize the book's contents and educate readers on whether the book is worth their time and suits their research interests. Identify the author's purposes for writing and then develop a thesis that evaluates whether the book was successful fulfilling these aims.

Audience

You should be writing for scholars who are somewhat familiar with the field, but who have most likely not read the book. I also encourage you to write the review with a specific publication in mind. Academic journals such as *Composition Forum*, *Composition Studies*, *Enculturation*, and *Present Tense* are excellent venues for newcomers. Take a close look at the guidelines for the journal you will target and follow them carefully.

Structure and Formatting

To help you understand a review's conventional structure, take a look at a few published reviews in your target journal. While different journals will have a range of conventions, in general your review should have an **evaluative thesis**, give context about the book's **intellectual tradition**, develop a **general summary** of its major sections, and offer an **examination of its strengths and limitations**. Note: constructive criticism is a staple of most book reviews, but it is commonly considered poor form to harshly pan a book, particularly if you are new to the field. Don't let the constructive criticism you offer overshadow your explication of the book's value to English Studies.

This file is supplemental material to Kinney, *Breaking into Print: The Book Review Genre in an Introductory Graduate Seminar in Rhetoric, Composition, and Writing Studies*, prompt 6.2 (2022), doi: 10.31719/pjaw.v6i2.112

Book Review Peer Review: Common Feedback from a Book Review Editor

I've developed the guidelines for peer review below from my experience as the Book Review Editor for *Composition Studies*. The questions I list identify common missteps book reviewers make.

Does the review have an evaluative thesis?

Identify the thesis, focusing on the degree it is functioning as an evaluation of the book as a whole. What feedback, if any, do you have to make the thesis evaluative?

Does the review devote a section to the book's intellectual tradition?

Identify the paragraph(s) where the reviewer describes the intellectual tradition. (If the review doesn't, note a place where the writer might include it.) Is the intellectual tradition written so that readers will be able to identify the intervention the book makes?

Does the review suggest constructive criticism or limitations of scope?

While it's unwise to slam a book, most reviews offer at least some discussion of constructive criticism or limitations of scope. Identify the place(s) in the review where you find this kind of commentary, or suggest an appropriate spot to place it. If you have advice (how to tone down harshness or add criticism if it is thin or missing), please note as much.

Does the review accurately gauge the needs of its audience?

One common mistake reviewers make is they don't take into account that readers haven't read the book. As you read the draft, make notes of when the reviewer may be taking liberties about readers' prior knowledge.

Does the review follow a conventional structure?

A review that focuses on a book versus one that focuses on an edited collection will look somewhat different, but in either case, it is the job of the reviewer to give a summary of the book's major sections, pointing to aspects that serve as evidence for the book's successes or limitations.

Looking at the review as a whole, are there ways that it could be more engaging?

The best reviews attempt to teach the reader something about the field beyond what is in the book itself. Identify places where the review is doing this or note ideas for how the review might do so. If you have advice on how to make the review more engaging, note it here.

Now that you've read your peer's review, what questions do you have about your draft?

If you did something differently than your peer, make a note to address during class discussion.