

Writing Book Reviews

A Handout from the EcoTeach Center, Duke University

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Book reviews play a vital role in the discipline: They allow economists, with a minimum of effort, to keep up with what is current in the literature.

Of all the genres of economics writing, the book review is one of the few places where an economist's personality and style are permitted to be flagrantly displayed. Scholarly articles are usually sober and tied down to a particular format. Not so with book reviews. In a book review, you have license to begin with a catchy opening, as Robert Solow, a Nobel Prize winner, once did:

Like all good things for body and soul, this book is going to hurt. —Review of *Activity Analysis of Production and Allocation*, from the *American Economic Review*, June 1952

Or, to take a more recent example, this time by another Nobel winner, Amartya Sen:

This is a great book. But it begins terribly. —Review of *Poverty, Inequality, and Development*, from the *Economic Journal*, March 1983

But it's not just the beginning that can be catchy. The ending can be clever, too:

Were there a Surgeon General of neoclassical economics, this book would carry a warning label. —Bruce J. Caldwell, final sentence, review of *Against Machines: Protecting Economics from Science*, from the *Journal of Economic Literature*, June 1990

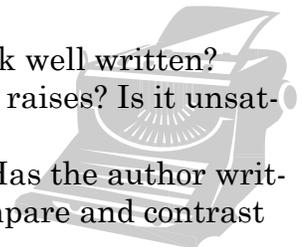
So cut loose and have fun with this genre. But (there's always a *but*, isn't there?): Remember that the book review has a serious, utilitarian purpose. All fun with no content makes for a failed review. With that in mind, here are a few things to consider when writing a review.

Come to the point quickly. Is this a book your audience is likely to find worthwhile?

Give readers an overview of the main contents of the book. What is the book about? What is its thesis or emphasis?

State the strengths and weaknesses of the book. Is the book well written? Does it support its arguments? Does it fulfill the expectations it raises? Is it unsatisfactory in some way?

Explain how the book fits in with the existing literature. Has the author written other books of its kind? If so, how does the present book compare and contrast



to the author's previous work? How does the book respond to or continue studies by other authors?

State the author's credentials. Is the author a professor of economics, or is he or she of another discipline? Is the author a known ideologue or does he or she come from a particular milieu that might color their attitudes and positions?

Note any miscellaneous, interesting, or useful features of the book.

Above all, keep this in mind: A book review is not just a summary or recap of a book's content—it is not a book report!—but also an appraisal of the book: its contribution, its importance, its usefulness.