Writing a Book Review for Popular Reads

Introduction

Popular science or historical nonfiction are often pleasant reads because they present a compelling story. However, these narratives are framed with the author’s point of view in mind and often reflect a particular and limited argument. Since life is not so often clean and clear, it may be difficult for a student to reconcile her/his own personal opinion with those presented in the text or for her/him to form an informed criticism on the subject. Therefore, a critical book review essay can be a challenge for many students not familiar with such work as they have limited information and are presented with an already attractive thesis, albeit constructed by the author. This post shares a scheme for the assignment developed by Dr. Jee-weon Cha of Grinnell College.

*It is advisable that the number of books be evenly distributed among the class once students have indicated their top two/three preferences.

Guidelines

After selecting a book from the supplemental list and reading it entirely, you can begin to outline a book review. Your review should do three things: summarize, critique, and contextualize.

1. You should summarize the book, presenting the author’s thesis, aims, main points, and conclusion in a clear and concise fashion and in your own words.
   1. Introduce and evaluate the author’s discussion. Pay specific attention to the examples presented in the text and the references from which the information is drawn. What key elements are necessary to supporting the author’s thesis? Is the author’s expertise evident in the work?
   2. The summary should follow the author’s argument and content that is presented in the book, but should not be rely on her/his words. Avoid excessive direct quotations and express the author’s ideas as you understand them.
   3. A review can adopt the major organizing themes of the book or focus in on a specific topic or chapter so long as it is substantial.

2. You should provide a critique of the book, i.e., an evaluation that gives your judgment of the book’s quality.
   1. Carefully note your own thoughts, response, and reaction to the author’s argument. Was there any topic that you found particularly interesting, exciting, or shocking? Are you convinced?
   2. Do not be intimidated by your lack of knowledge on the subject. The only skills that you need are the ability to follow an argument and to test its validity.
   3. The critique does not have to be negative. Just be sure to justify and support your position on the subject of the author’s work.

3. You should situate the book within a broader context. In order to discover that context, you will have to venture beyond the assigned book.
   1. Can you identify what references the author cites most frequently? Do these fall among a specific genre or scholarly stature?
   2. How does the book you have chosen fit within the list of other books that the author has published? Does this give you a sense of the author's motive for publishing this work?
   3. Are there any other books that share the same topic that you may compare with? They can be used to compare a counter or supportive argument with respect to the author’s own.

You should aim to equally divide your review among the three sections, but can either focus on each of them sequentially or intersperse your comments throughout an essay form. Lastly, this review should elaborate the book's connection to the theme and scope of the class. You are not merely writing for a grade, plan for your essay to be read by an audience of your classmates to share your interests, opinions, and suggestions of a good read.