

Bibliographical Entry

Willard, Dallas. *Renovation of the Heart: Putting on the Character of Christ*. Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2002.

Biographical Sketch of the 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 (or editor's) competency or incompetence in writing the book.¹ The reviewer should illustrate specifically how the author's background, academic training, vocational pursuits, or similar background prepared, or failed to prepare, him or her for writing the book. The reviewer need not go into detail about family or all schools attended, unless those facts help one to interpret the book.

Summary of Contents

This section should be no longer than one-half of the review. The reviewer's purpose here is to focus on the contents of the book. The reviewer should give the reader of the review a thorough introduction to "what the book is about." One way to approach this is to make the first sentence of the summary as thorough as possible, using the remainder of the summary to elaborate on this "comprehensive sentence."

A common weakness in this section is that students summarize the first half of the book, begin to run out of space, and then slight the latter half of the book. The reviewer must not fall into this trap. He or she, carefully and logically, must organize the summary, being sure to 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. The aim of the summary is to introduce the reader to the forest, not to each

¹ Some of this material is adapted from Walter B. Shurden, *Hints on Writing a Critical Book Review* (Nashville: Broadman, 1972).

individual tree. Thus, the reviewer must concentrate on the significant and unique. Minute details may become part of the evaluation, but the reviewer should avoid the temptation to bog down in the summary.

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 or why not? What was unique about the book? Were there any unusual historical, theological, or literary traits? What biases (theological, philosophical, liberal, fundamentalist, denominational, hawk, dove, etc.) are evident? [Before critiquing the author’s biases, the reviewer should be sensitive to where his or her own may lie also!] What good is the book? Who ought to read it? (The reader should avoid the cliché, “every sincere Christian ought to read this book.”) What can the book and author teach the reader?

The “critical evaluation” should make up at least one half of the review. Before writing a critical book review, the new reviewer may wish to read some critical reviews in professional periodicals; however, if one cites such a review in the paper, proper documentation should be supplied with either a footnote or parenthetical reference.

Remember that a critical review is written for people who have never read the book. The reviewer should take nothing for granted and should not assume that the reader knows anything about the book’s contents or author. The reviewer might imagine that she is the only person who has read the book. Then the reviewer’s job is to explain and critique the book for everyone else.

The reviewer should be specific in the criticisms advanced, avoiding general statements that tell the reader nothing. In a review by Dr. Pitts, he stated, “Much of Martin’s argument depends upon the reliability of Josephus’s accounts of late first century Jerusalem. This fact requires Dr. Martin to defend Josephus.” This is an important statement by the reviewer and an important part of Martin’s work, but the reviewer must give examples of how the author did, indeed, “defend Josephus,” even citing specific page numbers where he did this.

As with all formal papers, a critical book review should be well written. The following are a few stylistic suggestions for the reviewer to keep in mind.

1. Avoid use of the first and second person in formal writing. While the use of first person is not considered the faux pas that it once was, the student should avoid it.
2. Avoid contractions in formal writing.
3. Be careful not to split infinitives. For example, “to carefully scrutinize the thesis of this author” is a split infinitive. The infinitive, “to scrutinize,” considered one word, should not be split with intervening words.
4. Avoid colloquial or trite expressions, such as “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 and available online.² Also, every Word Processor contains a spell-checker, but remember that Word Processing spell-checkers do not catch every misspelled word, such as “from” and “form” or “too” and “to.” Spelling errors indicate laziness and sloppiness and are inexcusable.
6. Vary styles of writing, for example, by beginning sentences differently and varying the use of complex and simple sentences.
7. Never leave sentence fragments. Every sentence must have a subject and a predicate, and neither should be considered understood.
8. Use transitions to make the review flow.
9. Always end the paper with a brief conclusion that summarizes the student’s conclusions and allows the paper to end smoothly, e.g., without an abrupt stop at the end of the paper.

² www.dictionary.com contains a composite of several English dictionaries.