Editorial

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‘A Guide to Writing Book Reviews’

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What is a book review?

A book and media review is a critical appraisal of a publication (often reflecting a reviewer's personal opinion or recommendation) that evaluates such aspects as organization and writing style, possible market appeal, and cultural, political, or literary significance¹. It is a form of literary criticism in which the work is analyzed based on content, style, and merit². It provides the readership with a quick, interesting, informative, and easy to read summary of a new publication. Put simply, it gives an opinion as to ‘who has written it, why it was written, what is in it, and is it any good?’ Reviewing a book can be a good way of getting yourself in print if you have not published previously. Before beginning your review examine how other published reviewers write.

Who reads the review?

Book reviews are written to inform a readership of new publications and information. It allows individuals to learn a bit about the publication before deciding to invest in the purchase of it. Writing a book or media review to meet the needs of the readership is vital. The Journal of Emergency Primary Health Care is a peer-reviewed, international electronic journal that aims to advance and promote the science and the art of prehospital care research, education, clinical practice, policy and service delivery, and to provide a forum to respond to the professional interests of the multidisciplinary emergency primary health care community. Our readership is focused in the emergency primary health care context – a broad group that includes paramedics, nurses, physicians, fire, rescue, and other emergency service personnel. Our international readership is particularly important, so it is imperative for reviewers to consider whether a reader in a region or country very different from their own will be able to make sense of everything in their review. Reviews should interest readers in locations other than our own and ensure they are presented in such a way that the international audience is able to draw information relevant to their local context.

What we expect from a reviewer?

Firstly, reviewers should have knowledge of a subject area. In order for the Editorial Team to assign suitable media to reviewers, we will require some information about you. Secondly, reviewers should have an interest in contributing to emergency primary health care, the professions that work in it, and to the JEPHC. Generally, reviewers are invited to contribute a publication once a year. Thirdly, reviewers should provide a professional opinion about the media they review that is fair, balanced and interesting. Reviewers are not normally paid for their reviews. Such activities are considered as a service to the profession.

If you are unable to review a book that you have been sent, please contact the Editorial Assistant to arrange for its return.

What should a review cover?

A good review should be informative, engaging and constructively opinionated. There is no single universal way to write a book review. Reviews of books and other media usually take a descriptive or critical position. The descriptive review is one where the reviewer provides a factual account of the information presented within the publication. The method requires reviewers to explicate the nature and content of what is presented, through the examination of the stated claims it makes regarding aims and purposes, and how it does (or does not) meet them. A critical review differs in that it may include descriptive commentary, but it goes further to evaluate the publication in terms of accepted academic, scholastic and literary standards. Critical reviews determine if claims to authenticity are validated, and if the material proposed is supported by solid evidence. A comprehensive review will do both, by adopting a descriptive and critical position. Examining publications for literary and scientific rigour is essential in an environment where the emphasis is on evidence-based practice. Textbooks traditionally form an essential component to learning and teaching, and quite simply, authors have to get it right!

There are a few key principles that should guide the preparation and publication of a book review:

- It should be informative, in that it tells readers what the book is about. They will want to know what the book is about, so include some information on what the chapters and/or sections contain, as well as the basic structure of the book. Your job is to provide a summary of the subject matter³.
- A review should be engaging but succinct and reader-friendly. Reviews should be no longer than one page of A4, and formatted in short paragraphs. The readership doesn't want or need to know everything about the publication. It can be as short as 50-100 words, or as long as 1500 words, depending on the purpose of the review.
- A review should be constructively opinionated. They are by definition highly personal and reflect the opinions of the reviewer. Readers want to know what you thought of it. Was it good or bad? Was it interesting and informative, or leaden and irrelevant? In your opinion, is it to be recommended or not? To whom would you recommend it? ³

Steps for Writing a Good Book Review⁴

1. Preparing for a book review

- Select a book you are genuinely interested in. It will help you write a strong review.
- Allow yourself time to assimilate what you have read so that the book can be seen in perspective.
- Read the book with care and thoroughly. Don't read just to discover the author's main points, or skip-read. Note your impressions as you read.
- Engage with the text, and make notes as you go of important points.
- Keep in mind the need for achieving a single impression which must be made clear to the reader.

2. Introduce the subject, scope, and type of book

- Identify the book by author(s), title, and publisher, publication date, ISBN, number of pages and cost in Australian currency.
- Specify the type of book (e.g. textbook, fiction, non-fiction, biography,
- Outline the book's theme and target audience and provide some background to enable the reader to place the book into a specific context.

3. Briefly summarize the content

- At the beginning, note some facts and ideas you already know about the book's topic. Survey it summarily and make some predictions of what it seeks to achieve. This can be achieved easily by looking at the dust cover or precis, the preface and table of contents. When you do, ask yourself these questions:
 - i. What does the title promise the book will cover or argue?
 - ii. What does the preface promise about the book?
 - iii. What does the table of contents tell you about how the book is organized?
 - iv. Who's the audience for this book?
- Provide a summary of this, including paraphrases and quotations, of the book's thesis and primary supporting points.

4. Provide your reactions to the book

- Describe the book: Is it interesting, memorable, entertaining? Why?
- Is the material appropriate, accurate and contemporary?
- As you read, reflect on the book's title and aims, and view each section to get an overall sense of its layout. Reflect on your impressions against what is presented in the section.
- Ask yourself these questions: How well does the book fulfil the aims stated? How effective is the book's methodology? Are the arguments made effective? How persuasive is the evidence presented? How clearly is it written?
- Respond to the author's opinions: What do you agree with? And why? What do you disagree with? And why?
- Explore issues the book raises: What possibilities does the book suggest? Explain. What matters does the book leave out? Explain.
- Relate the book to wider professionally relevant issues: How did the book affect the discipline? Are the offerings made useful and appropriate? How is the book related to your own context?
- If you know other books on this same subject, you can compare the arguments and quality of the book you're reviewing with the others, emphasizing what's new and what's especially valuable in the book you're reviewing

5. Conclude by summarizing your ideas

- Close with a direct comment on the book, and tie together issues raised in the review. Briefly restate your main points in summary form.
- Finally, make your recommendations as to who may benefit from reading and/or purchasing the publication.

How to become a reviewer?

If you would like to be considered as a book or media reviewer for JEPHC, please download and complete an [application form](#), and submit to the Editorial Assistant by fax or email as indicated on the form.

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4. St. Cloud State University. Literacy Education Online (LEO) - Writing Book Reviews. Available at: <http://leo.stcloudstate.edu/acadwrite/bookrev.html>. Accessed 10 September 2006.