

Book Review Assignment

For this class, you are required to write a book review of a *non-fiction* book dealing with *contemporary Europe* (after 1945). Reviews of fiction or guidebooks will not be accepted. Your book should at least have 200 pages. I would like you to choose a book that you are really interested in or that will help you prepare yourself for the European Odyssey. Please look at the syllabus to get an idea of what topics we will cover in class, and then search for books connected to these topics. I highly recommend that you let me know which book you are planning to review before you start reading it. Interesting topics about which you will find a number of different books include conflicts (Northern Ireland, Basques, former Yugoslavia), migration and religious issues (refugees, Muslims in Europe), and the European Union.

Here are some ideas:

- Reid, T. R. *The United States of Europe* [European Union]
- Kinzer, S. *Crescent and Star* [Turkey]
- Glenny, M. *The Fall of Yugoslavia or The Balkans* [Yugoslavia War]
- Jarausch, K. *The Rush to German Unity* [German Reunification]
- Silber, L. *Yugoslavia: Death of a Nation* [Yugoslavia War]

Your book review will not be due until *March 31*, the last day of my class on the European Odyssey, but I highly recommend that you do your book review *before* you even go on the Odyssey because

- You can use the book to prepare yourself for the trip
- You don't have to carry another book with you
- You have more free time available in Europe
- You can type your review

Your book review should be 3-4 typed pages long (double-spaced, one-inch margins) or the hand-written equivalent if you submit it during the Odyssey. I expect your book review to be free of grammatical and spelling errors, and otherwise well edited. Please refer to the next pages for tips about how to write good book reviews.

I won't be in Oshkosh during interim, but you can send me your book review by mail (addressed to Heike Alberts, Department of Geography, University of Wisconsin-Oshkosh, 800 Algoma Boulevard, Oshkosh WI, 54901) or put it in my mailbox in Halsey 330. I will grade it as soon as I get back from Europe (end of January) and email you your grade if you want.

Writing Good Book Reviews

A book review does not only tell you what a book is about, but also whether it achieves what it is trying to do. Therefore, a book review is more than a summary of the content (even though this is an important component), but a critical analysis of the book and your reactions to it.

While you are reading the book, take notes about the following issues:

- What is the author's main goal in writing this book? (Convince you of his position on a controversy? Explain the background of an event? Raise awareness of a particular issue?)
- What are the author's main points?
- What kind of evidence does the author provide to make his or her points? How convincing is this evidence?
- Is the book well written? (Easily understandable? Good style?)
- What group of readers would find this book most useful (Lay people? Students? Experts in the area?)

A book review usually has the following components

1) Introduction (one or two paragraphs)

- Bibliographic information (author, title, date of publication, publisher, number of pages, type of book)
- Brief overview of the theme, purpose and your evaluation

2) Summary of the content (about two pages)

- Brief summary of the key points of each chapter or group of chapters
- Paraphrase the information, but use a short quote when appropriate

3) Evaluation and conclusion (about one page)

- Give your opinion about the book. Is the book easy to read or confusing? Is the book interesting, entertaining, instructive? Does the author support his arguments well? What are the book's greatest strengths and weaknesses? Who would you recommend the book to?

Sample Book Review

(This is a fictional review of a work that does not exist--it is intended to show you how a review should be written, with some general guidelines to help you write your own review)

Writer, Whattagreat. *How to Write Great Book Reviews: An Introduction for Undergraduates*. New York: Outstanding Publications, Inc., 1991. Pp. 237.

Most students have had little experience writing "formal" academic papers. When confronted with an assignment to write a book review, they often do not know what to do. Even general guidelines do not provide enough information for many undergraduates. To help students deal with this problem, Whattagreat Writer has written an excellent practical guide to writing book reviews. *How to Write Great Book Reviews: An Introduction for Undergraduates* will undoubtedly become the standard work on this subject.

Writer's work is a well organized, carefully prepared volume, which covers all conceivable aspects of writing book reviews. In addition to the excellent text, there are numerous illustrations, showing proper page layout, sample title pages, and practical aspects of preparing book reviews. The index is thorough, without being too detailed to use easily. The text is also well written, with Writer's subtle sense of humor brightening what might otherwise be considered a dull subject.

To assist students, Writer has also included a list of basic elements to include, as well as common errors to avoid. Several of the most important are:

1. List bibliographic information at the top of the first page of the review.
2. Avoid contractions. For example, instead of "don't," use "do not." (Here Writer's subtle humor may go unnoticed, as he cleverly suggests, "Don't use contractions." [p. 47].)
3. If at all possible, type the paper. If you must write it by hand, make sure that the handwriting is neat and legible, in ink.
4. Be consistent with tenses. In general, use present tense when you are dealing with the author and the book itself, and past tense when you discuss what the author is describing.
5. Avoid 1-sentence paragraphs. Also, your paragraphs should generally be no longer than three quarters of a page.

Because this is a practical guide for students, rather than the result of research in historical documents, Writer does not include footnotes. However, his extensive bibliography provides a thorough guide to other reference works, which students may find useful in preparing other written assignments.

Writer's only weakness is his tendency to provide too many examples for each subject. By limiting his selection of examples to one or two of the most important possibilities for each subject, his work would have been reduced in size, and consequently easier for students to use. Because of the excellent index, however, most students will have little difficulty using this work to improve the quality of their book reviews.

Adapted from: <http://faculty.luther.edu/~slindmar/mockrvw.pdf>

Sample of a Professional Book Review

Jared Diamond: *Guns, Germs, and Steel*, W.W. Norton & Company, Copyright 1997, 425 pages

Guns, Germs, and Steel: The Fates of Human Societies richly deserves the 1998 Pulitzer prize for general nonfiction it garnered. A thorough and compelling study of the reasons behind the dominance of select cultures throughout humanity's history, this book written by a professor of physiology at the UCLA School of Medicine is tremendously accessible to the layperson. Diamond, who is also preeminent in the arenas of evolutionary biology and biogeography, presents a straightforward explanation for the diversity of human fates that is soundly supported by information from many fields of scientific inquiry.

Perhaps the most notable feat *Guns, Germs, and Steel* accomplishes is that of providing a far more persuasive explanation for ethnic and racial differences than can racist theories (like the recently controversial *Bell Curve*) of human history. Broad in scope, Diamond's book covers 13,000 years of humanity's past over the entire world. While no single continent or society is covered to its greatest depth, Australia, New Guinea and New Zealand provide the greatest amount of anecdotal illustration, since Diamond spent a number of years in the region engaged in scientific study. Diamond does an admirable job of representing the macrocosm by the microcosm, making his theory of history palatable to the general reader.

How did Eurasians come to conquer Native Americans, Africans and Aboriginal Australians instead of the other way around? The answer, according to Jared Diamond, lies with four basic sets of innate differences in the environments from which different peoples arose. Arguing that food production is critical for a society to feed non-food-producing specialists and a larger population that would have a military advantage of sheer numbers, Diamond illustrates the inequitable distribution of domesticable plants and animals around the world. A second set of factors affected the greatly differing rates of diffusion and migration on the different continents. Eurasia, with its east-west major axis and modest geographical and ecological barriers, saw a far quicker rate of diffusion of domesticated food sources, diseases and technologies than did Africa and the Americas, with their north-south major axes. A third set of factors affected diffusion and migration between continents; the varying degrees of isolation between land masses has greatly affected the diffusion rates. And a fourth set of factors, consisting of differences in area and total population size between the continents, affects the pressure put on societies to adopt and retain innovations, or be subsumed by their neighbors.

The "guns, germs, and steel" of the book's title refer to weapons, diseases, and technologies, whose development and spread are to a great extent dependent on the four sets of factors Diamond summarizes as responsible for history's broadest patterns. At the base of Diamond's pyramidal argument is food production, and he makes a stellar case for history being driven by chance facts of geography, a story of "haves" and "havenots" in terms of suitable environments rather than an indication of genetic superiors and inferiors. Readable and plain-spoken, *Guns, Germs, and Steel* will fascinate anyone interested in the history of humans on this peculiar little planet.

