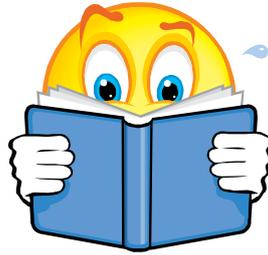


## How to read and write book reviews



A book review provides an evaluation of a book, and by the end of it the reader should know:

- The bibliographic details of the book (author, date, title, publisher information, price)
- A summary of what the book is about – what it focuses on and what approach it takes (e.g. style, format/layout, target audience)
- Whether it is worth reading (and why)

The screenshot shows a web browser window with the URL [www.ajaonline.org/online-review-book/1824](http://www.ajaonline.org/online-review-book/1824). The page is the 'ONLINE REVIEW: BOOK' section for the July 2014 (118.3) issue. The review is titled 'American Egyptologist: The Life of James Henry Breasted and the Creation of His Oriental Institute' by Eric H. Cline. The review text begins with 'Abt's biography of James Henry Breasted is absorbing, compelling, and instructive. Written by a master storyteller, the monumental volume contains more than 500 pages of exhaustive detailed text and notes, set in small type, which describe Breasted's life and accomplishments and place them within the context of the world events and scholarly advances of his day. Without doubt, it will be the definitive work on Breasted, far surpassing the previous biography that was written and published in 1943 by Breasted's own son, Charles (*Pioneer to the Past: The Story of James Henry Breasted, Archaeologist* [Chicago]).' The review continues with details about Breasted's education and work at the University of Chicago.

Figure 1: Screenshot of a book review (approximately 1400 words long) <http://www.ajaonline.org/online-review-book/1824> Accessed 17 June 2014

## Where do book reviews appear?

- Specialist academic journals usually have a section dedicated to book reviews (sometimes in each issue; sometimes in a special annual issue). These may also be accessible online without a log-in. These are likely to be the most appropriate reviews to use when researching and writing academic assignments.
- Book review publications e.g. Times Literary Supplement, London Review of Books, New York Review of Books
- Broadsheet newspapers – often in weekend sections e.g. Guardian Review (Saturdays)
- Magazines will often carry reviews (sometimes these are very short)



Logo headings for Times Literature Supplement and London Review of Books

## Keeping up to date with publications and reviews

Studying Effectively provides details on monitoring publisher alerts and other online indexes so that you can keep up with new publications and reviews.



The screenshot shows a web browser window displaying the University of Nottingham website. The page is titled 'Keeping up to date' and is part of the 'Studying Effectively' section. The main content area includes a navigation menu on the left, a search bar at the top, and a main text area with the following sections:

- Keeping up to date**
- Why do this?** Keeping up-to-date with recent publications and developments in different fields is vital for anyone involved in ongoing study. However, the sheer volume of new information can be overwhelming. Current awareness services, sometimes called alerting services, can help you manage the amount of information available.
- What you can do**
  - Alerting services from publishers** can keep you up to date with new books and other information.
  - Have you thought about using **social media** to help you keep up-to-date? Lots of tools allow you to communicate and collaborate with like minded people
  - Using **saved search functionality and alerting tools** within bibliographic databases can help you keep track of new research being published in your discipline.
  - Maybe you have a favourite journal and you want to view the **table of contents** as soon as it is published.
  - You will have seen **RSS** icons on many webpages. This allows you to automatically receive updates to websites via an RSS reader.
  - Mailing lists and discussion groups** are also a good way to collaborate with people interested in similar subject areas.
- Further reading**
- Reading and interpreting sources and data**
  - Types of information
  - Finding resources
- Writing**
  - Strategies for writing
  - Managing references
- People who can help**
  - Talk to someone in your school or a **specialist support service**

The footer of the page provides contact information for the Studying Effectively team at the Kings Meadow Campus, including a telephone number (+44 (0) 115 951 5151), a fax number (+44 (0) 115 951 5156), and an email address (enquiries@nottingham.ac.uk).

### **What types of book reviews are there?**

- Summary reviews – especially in popular mainstream magazines, these usually just provide a synopsis (sometimes based on a publisher or author’s press release) and possibly some opinion comments
- Short reviews (500-800 words) – these usually include a summary of the book with some limited critical commentary and are likely to be included in broadsheet newspapers and some specialist journals
- Longer review pieces (1000-1500 words) – these usually provide a more in-depth review of a significant publication in the discipline
- Review essays (2000 words or longer) – some publications will review a selection of books on a single theme, critiquing their contribution to the topic through evaluation of comparative strengths and weaknesses. These may have been published to coincide with an anniversary or relevant contemporary events.

### **Why are book reviews worth reading?**

- They can provide an overview of (new) publications in your subject area – it helps keep you up-to-date about your subject so you can select where there is value in you carrying out more in-depth reading of particular books
  - Do remember that reviews may have been accepted for publication around 18 months in advance, depending on the regularity of publication. Books are first received and distributed to suitable reviewers; the review is checked for suitability for publication by the book review editor; and finally the review is scheduled into an issue.
- Book reviews can provide an overview of (new) publications in connected areas related to your subject
  - Keeping up to date with reviews can be a good way to put your specialist subject knowledge into the broader context – what is going on in related areas that may have an impact on your topic?
- Reading two or three reviews in appropriate academic publications may give you a good understanding of the book itself

### **WARNINGS**

Reviews are not always ‘correct’. Reviewers may not always recognise the value of a new type of study in a discipline, or they may demonstrate prejudices or preferences in their reviewing style.

Reading book reviews should not be a substitute for reading a book but may help you focus your reading strategies and help you in understanding the basics of the book’s ideas/arguments.

## Writing a book review

Have you included...

- Clear bibliographic details
- A note about the author and how/why they are qualified to write on this topic (their job role/title; their areas of academic expertise)
- Summary of the author's main ideas or argument
  - Ask yourself: Does the author have a particularly strong view/bias?
- Overview of the book and its purpose
  - Does the title (with any subtitle) clearly convey and/or engage with the book's content?
  - Is it a new edition of an earlier text? Has it been updated (and, if so, how extensively)?
  - Is it a facsimile edition? Does the preface or introduction provide sufficient context for the content?
- Identification of the target audience/readership (General public? First year undergraduates? Postgraduate researchers? Experts in ....?)
  - What is the writing style? (Approachable? Dominated by jargon or specialist terminology? Suitable to the intended audience?)
  - Does the layout of the book work effectively? (Division of chapters, length of paragraphs/sentences, use of appropriate visual material, size and choice of font?)
- Discussion on how well the book covers what it sets out to discuss
  - What are the strengths and weaknesses of the book?
  - If visual material is included, does it add to the book (are there sufficient illustrations?)
- Comparison to other significant publications on the topic (The depth of comment on this may depend on the length of the review)
- A personal comment from the reviewer on whether the book is worth reading. (Do not make it a personal attack)

