

How to Write a Review

STEP 1: PREPARATION

- ~ *Examine the work*, including the title, table of contents (chapter headings), date of publication and bibliography (references). By doing this, you will get information about the topics covered, how the text is organized, and the sources that the author used in writing the text.
- ~ *Read the material carefully*, including the preface and/or introduction. Make notes as you read and flag important passages. Your notes may be about the text's purpose, themes, style, strengths and/or weaknesses.
- ~ *Find other reviews*. You may want or need to read other reviews of the text. Ask at the Information Desk for help in finding reviews.

STEP 2: WRITE THE REVIEW

Your review should both describe the work and offer an opinion about the work. Include statements about what you think the author tried to achieve (the work's purpose) and whether you think the author succeeded. Refer to specific parts of the work to support your opinion.

The following checklist is intended to help you write your review. Include some, but not necessarily all, of the elements listed. The first three elements in the checklist are especially important.

PURPOSE

- ~ Why did the author write the work? What did the author hope to achieve? The title, preface, and/or introduction might be helpful.

CONTENT

- ~ Is there a central thesis or argument?
- ~ What are the author's main ideas? How are they developed?

AUTHORITY

- ~ What are the author's background and qualifications?
- ~ Is the work written with expertise or with bias?
- ~ Are all the important aspects of the work's subject covered to a reasonable depth (no important topics left out or glossed over)?

AUTHOR'S STYLE

- ~ How would you describe the author's writing style? For example, is it simple, logical, technical or wordy?
- ~ Is the writing style suitable for the general public or for a target audience of "experts"?

FORMAT

- ~ Is the material physically attractive and durable? Is the print easy to read?
- ~ Does the book have helpful features like an index, illustrations, maps, charts, photographs, footnotes, etc.?

SIGNIFICANCE

- ~ How does this work compare with other works written on this subject or by this author?
- ~ Does this work make a significant contribution within its field?

HOW TO ORGANIZE YOUR REVIEW

Your review, though brief, should include the following sections.

PRELIMINARY INFORMATION

- ~ Begin your review with information about the book: its title, author, edition (if any), place of publication, publisher, date, number of pages, special features (maps, etc.), cost (if known). This information will be useful for the review's readers who may want to locate or order the book.

THE BEGINNING

- ~ Catch the reader's attention with an effective opening. This may be some interesting fact connected with the book or its author, or one of the items on the checklist that seems especially important. Avoid simply saying "This book is . . ."

DEVELOPMENT

- ~ Discuss the elements from the checklist that you think are most important. This is the body or main part of your review.
- ~ Your review should be brief and should not include chapters, long quotes or a list of references.

THE CONCLUSION

- ~ Conclude with the strengths and weaknesses of the material. Avoid mentioning minor problems like typing errors in the conclusion.
- ~ If possible, relate your closing remarks to your opening remark.

Ingstad, Helge, and Anne Stine Ingstad. *The Viking Discovery of America: The Excavation of a Norse Settlement in L'Anse aux Meadows, Newfoundland*. St. John's: Breakwater Books, 2000. 194p. photos. illus. maps. biblio. index. \$34.95. ISBN 1-55081-158-4.

In the 1950s the Norwegian archaeologist Helge Ingstad became convinced that the site of Vinland, where the sagas maintained that Vikings first wintered in North America around A.D. 1000, was situated in Canada rather than on the eastern seaboard of the United States. In 1960 he discovered a likely site at L'Anse aux Meadows on the northern tip of Newfoundland, where he and his wife conducted excavations during the 1960s. These excavations did not uncover any of the substantial artifacts that excite tourists and museum visitors, but they found enough –a stone lamp, an anvil, a bone needle, and especially a characteristic bronze ring-headed pin—to justify their theories.

In this book, beautifully produced with numerous maps, drawings, and photographs, the Ingstads present an account of their discoveries designed not merely for the specialist but for the serious general reader. They offer sober descriptions of their archeological discoveries, carefully sift the literary references in sagas and historical documents, yet also manage to convey the romance and excitement of their triumphant quest. Though a little repetitious and somewhat prolix in style, these reports provide a full cultural context for their findings.

It would be a slight exaggeration to call Helge a 20th-century Heinrich Schliemann discovering Viking North America with the aid of the *Greenlanders' Saga* instead of Troy with the *Iliad*, but he admirably exemplifies what can be done when historical and archeological expertise is linked with imaginative vision.

Much of the text has appeared before, but this edition contains new material (including some up-to-date illustrations), and is the first time that the full story has appeared in Canada, where L'Anse aux Meadows is now a national park and appears on the UNESCO World Heritage List. Anyone paying a visit to the site will profit from this attractive book.

Finally, one cannot resist noting with awe that the foreword was signed by Helge Ingstad in August 2000, when he was in his 101st year.

W. J. Keith

- ← Preliminary information.
- ← Effective beginning introduces thesis of book.
- ← Main ideas discovered.
- ← Positive comment on book's features.
- ← Authors' style and intended audience.
- ← Strengths and weaknesses.
- ← Author's contribution to field.
- ← Special features.
- ← Reviewer's recommendation.
- ← Concluding remark about author echoes the beginning.

(*Canadian Book Review Annual 2000, 2001*, pp. 259-260)

SAMPLE REVIEW TWO

Hole, Jim, and Lois Hole. *Bedding Plants*. St. Albert: Hole's, 2000. 143 p. Questions and Answers, 1. photos. index. \$9.95pa. ISBN 0-9682791-5.

Hole, Jim, and Lois Hole. *Roses*. St. Albert: Hole's, 2000. 128p. Questions and Answers, 2.photos. index. \$9.95pa. ISBN 0-9682791-6.

One of the most useful tools any gardener can have is a good relation with the knowledgeable folks at a local nursery. Drawing on the wealth of experience and expertise of the staff at family-owned Hole's Nursery, the mother-and-son team of Lois and Jim Hole answer dozens of questions collected from gardeners in need of advice.

Questions are grouped by general subject area. In *Bedding Plants*, chapters focus on soil, choosing annuals, seeding, growing, and troubleshooting. A final, lengthy chapter answers questions specific to particular varieties on annual plants. In *Roses*, topics covered include rose categories and classification, starting and growing roses, using roses (cuttings, drying, and eating them), troubleshooting, and rose varieties. Both books include detailed indexes with good cross-referencing.

Questions are answered by both Lois and Jim Hole, Lois focuses on general answers, giving gardeners the kind of quick, straightforward information that can be used immediately, Jim, on the other hand, offers detailed explanations of the "why" behind the "how". His fascination with the science of growing is palpable and his answers are accessible and fascinating.

The tag-team approach presents information as if the reader has dropped into the garden centre for a chat about aphids or zonal geraniums. Black-and-white photographs complement the text throughout. Though many gardeners like their gardening books to have lots of full-color spreads, the information packed between the covers in these two volumes easily makes up for the lack of a more splashy design.

Nikki Tate-Stratton

← Preliminary information.

← Preliminary information.

← Effective beginning with human-interest remark.

← Author's qualifications.

← Contents and organization of the books.

← Brief comment on the books' features.

← Authors' styles.

← Books' strengths.

← Informal, chatty style.

← Concluding remark about the books' strengths and reviewer's recommendation.

(*Canadian Book Review Annual 2000, 2001*, p. 405)

REFERENCES

A concise guide to writing a critical book review. (n.d.). Retrieved November 23, 2001, from <http://www.library.ualberta.ca/guides/bookreview/index.cfm>

Thomson, A. (1991, December). How to review a book. *Canadian Library Journal*, 48(6), 416-418.

Wilson, J. M. (Ed.). (2001). *Canadian book review annual 2000*. Toronto, Canada: Peter Martin Associated.