

# Critical Book Review Guidelines

## AP Government

### Coach Marsh

The book review is an extended essay based upon critical historical writing. In addition to requiring a demonstration of basic communication skills, it demands a certain expertise in digesting, analyzing, and synthesizing the complex thesis of a book. Although a review should never be mere summation, some effort along this line is obviously required in order to maintain continuity of thought and to explore the various aspects of the book.

Bibliographical Citation: At the beginning of the review, but separate from the narrative, give a complete bibliographical citation. A sample bibliographical citation is given below—

**McCullough, David. *John Adams*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 2001.**

The critical book review may include any or all of the following—

Synopsis: Defined as a brief general review or condensation, the synopsis should be both brief and general. This is not a chapter by chapter summary. Rather, it should summarize the key points and reflect the crux of the author's argument and outline.

Author's background: Information on the author's background may be available on the dust jacket and/or at the end of the book. If not references such as *Contemporary Authors* or *Who's Who* may prove helpful. Online resources should be available as well. It may be important to establish the credentials of the author and to point out conditioning influences that might lead to a biased account (e.g. nationality, race, religion, etc.).

Author's Purpose: The purpose will often be stated or implied in the introductory sections of the book. Consider whether or not the purpose was legitimate and if it was accomplished. Be mindful that some authors will officially state one purpose in the introduction as a form of subtle propaganda, while pursuing a less objective purpose throughout the book.

Scope: This refers to how broadly or narrowly the author treats his/her subjects. The chronological time period(s) and the topics included are two important aspects, but it is also helpful to know the range of material explored (i.e. economic, political, religious, military, social, technological, etc.)

Author's Organization, Research, Style, and Objectivity: Address issues of organization of material and subject, amount and quality of research, writing style (both in regard to readability and clarity of arguments), and objectivity of the author. This involves positive and negative assessments, if applicable.

**Critical Assessment:** This section is the heart of an effective review and should consume most of the space. Critically analyze the book and evaluate the author's thesis, theme, argument, or point of view. What message or information was the author trying to convey? What viewpoint or perspective did he/she bring to the subject? State this and demonstrate clearly how the author developed it by using examples from the book. This commentary and analysis will be in addition to the synopsis provided at the outset. Finally, were the theme and/or perspective convincing and were the objectives achieved? Why or why not? (HINT: Once you have outlined your own assessment, you might check other sources to complement or augment your own critique. The *Book Review Digest* and *Book Review Index* may be helpful in this regard. Organized by publication date, these volumes are located in Carmichael Library at the University of Montevallo)

**Recommendation:** The conclusion should include some type of evaluation. What contribution does the book make to the field of study or knowledge in this area? Is this work worth reading? Why or why not? Who should read the book? (NOTE: Do not use the first person in formal writing—"I liked the book very much" and "I would recommend this book for every college student" are unacceptable.)

### **ADDITIONAL GUIDELINES**

A key purpose of the book review is to require the student to evaluate an author's work and to convey this information in clear, concise prose. After completing the review, ask the following questions—

1. Did I inform the reader of the subject and how the author treated it?
2. Did I evaluate the work in a scholarly manner by including enough summary to explain the book but by giving greatest attention to critical analysis and commentary on the theme, thesis, argument, or point of view?
3. Can the reader make an intelligent assessment of the book based upon my review?
4. Have I produced clear and readable narrative?

**Plagiarism:** Defined as stealing another's work without giving proper credit to the source, plagiarism includes both "borrowing a writer's words as well as his ideas. In preparing a book review, put the information in your own words or, when necessary, use quotation marks. When using a direct quotation from the book, simply put the page number in parentheses at the end of the quotation. For example, "Old soldiers never die; they just fade away." (127) If quoting another review from a professional journal, cite the author, journal, issue, and page number; or simply incorporate that info into your prose. For example, "In *The Journal of American History*, historian Jack P. Greene contends that..."