

**Department of Anthropology**  
**Spring 2009**  
**How to Write A Critical Book Review Critique**

**INTRODUCTION**

Go to Morris Library on home page, select Database, then Full text. Select “JSTOR” then select “Browse” and search through journals in history and anthropology for samples of book reviews. Even easier, go to the Periodical Section of Morris Library [first floor] go to journal section, browse through Anthropological and History Journals; flip to the book review section and read a few reviews so that you are familiar with the tone of a scholarly book critique. Also, ask the research librarian where you can find other book reviews for *“Broken Spear”* and *“Things Fall Apart.”* Read what other reviews have said about the texts but be careful to take good notes so you can correctly attribute what a reviewer has to say, to that reviewer.

**DIRECTIONS**

A book critique is not the same thing as a book report, which simply summarizes the content of a book. When writing a book critique, you not only report on the content of the book but also, assess its strengths and weaknesses. Your critique should have two goals: first to inform the reader about the content of the book, and second, to provide an evaluation that gives your judgment of the book

A critical book review briefly describes the content of the book and more importantly, provides in-depth analysis and evaluation of its ideas and purpose. The descriptive element of a review should give the reader an understanding of the author’s arguments, while the evaluative element should detail your assessment of the book’s ideas.

Familiarize yourself with the book before reading it . Note the title and subtitle. What do they lead you to expect about the book’s ideas? Study the table of contents, chapter titles to understand how the author has organized the content. Read the preface or introduction for statements of the author’s intended purpose in writing the book. Do some research and read any information about the author to learn what authority he or she has to write about the topic area of the book. If the book is fiction, what insights does the author bring to understanding the culture and circumstances of the basic plot?

The assigned books do not follow typical western narrative style or story line. One book, ***Broken Spear*** is about the Aztec reaction to the Spanish Conquest, providing the on the spot reactions of the Aztec Native Americans which presents an alternative historical view of this crucial historical view, We rarely read the view of the losers in histories of major events. For more information, be sure to read the preface/ introduction. On the other hand, ***Things Fall Apart*** is an ethnographical novel whose narrative is about a native culture turned up-side down due to the white man and colonialism. The key point in the story is the undermining of Igbo traditional culture. The author Achebe follows the style of an African narrative which is different than you are use to reading. You will recognize the differences when you stumble on the narrative where something happens you do not expect, and where characters act differently than you expect. You will also find differences because Achebe is writing about that historical period where colonialism changed traditional Igbo culture—hence the title “Things Fall Apart”.

Your **introduction** should include an overview of the book that incorporates an encapsulated summary and a hint of your general judgment. This is equivalent to a thesis statement. Do not spend more than one third or so of the paper summarizing the book. In writing a critique you do not just relate whether or not you liked the book; you also must tell your reader *why* you liked or disliked it. It is not enough to say “This book is interesting” you need to explain *why* it is interesting or disinteresting.

To understand your own reaction to the book, you need to read it carefully and critically. As a ***critical reader***, you are not passive; you should ask questions of the book and note reactions as you read. This is especially true with “Broken Spears” and “Things Fall Apart” because you are reading about two very different cultures in very different time periods: Aztec (Mexican pre Cortez culture) and Igbo (African Igbo culture at the beginning of the British colonialism. Igbo people are a part of present day Nigeria). Your critique discusses those questions and reactions.

Here are a number of questions you can address as part of your critique. You need not answer them all, but questions one and two are essential to any book critique, so those must be included. And these are ABSOLUTELY NOT to be answered one after the other. Do not have one paragraph that answers one, and then the next paragraph that answers the next, etc. The answers should be part of a carefully constructed essay, complete with topic sentences and transitions. Your title should be something catchy and your opening sentence should capture my interest so that I want to read the rest of your critique.

What is your overall opinion of the book? On what basis has this opinion been formulated? That is, tell the reader what you think and how you arrived at this judgment. What did you expect to learn when you picked up the book and read the preface and forward? To what extent—and how effectively—were your expectations met? Did you wish you could talk back to the author? Amplify upon and explain your reactions.

1. Identify the author's thesis and explain it in your own words. How clearly and in what context is it stated and, subsequently developed? To what extent and how effectively is this thesis proven? Use examples to amplify your responses. If arguments or perspectives were missing, why do you think this might be?
2. What are the author's aims? How well have they been achieved especially with regard to the way the book is organized? Are these aims supported or justified? How closely does the organization follow the author's aims? Are there places/ sections/ sentences/ actions in the book that evoke a strong response from you? What are those words or sentences? What is your reaction?
3. How are the author's main points presented, explained, and supported? What assumptions lie behind these points? What would be the most effective way for you to compress and/or re-order the author's scheme of presentation and argument?
4. Identify the assumptions made by the author in both the approach to and the writing of the book. For example, what prior knowledge does the author expect readers to possess? How effectively are those assumptions worked into the overall presentation? What assumptions do you think should not have been made? Why?
5. What new insights do you have as a result of reading this book? Has your world view changed? If so, why? If not, why not?
6. Does the author's presentation seem fair and accurate? Is the interpretation valid? Are you aware of a new way to understand history? What is it?
7. What comments can you make about the over-all presentation of the subject of the book?
8. What is your recommendation: do you think others would enjoy reading the book? What type of audience would you recommend this book to? Over-all, what did you gain by reading this book? What do you think that others who read the book will gain? If you have a negative opinion of the book, tell why you think others would not enjoy reading the book.