

# Writing a Book Review

Every time you've read a book, you've reviewed it whether that's just in your head or talking about it with a friend. While reviewing books informally comes second nature to us, writing a book review that other people will read requires some planning. Fortunately, book reviews are a genre of writing with a pretty distinct structure.

## Step 1. Read a book!

Go into a book to be reviewed with an open mind if you are planning to publicly review it. If you start reading with negative thoughts or knowing that you won't like the book, then you will put out a biased book review. Remember that just because you didn't exactly like a book, it isn't necessarily a *bad* book. It's okay to write a negative review, just make sure what you write is balanced, honest, and based on defined criteria that you identify as you read. As you are jotting down notes about the book, start thinking about how you are going to focus your review.

## Step 2. Jot down notes as you read!

**Things you could take note of:**

- Characters (What makes each character special? Are they round or flat characters? How are they all related?)
- Themes (Is there a particular theme in the book? Are there multiple themes? How well does the author incorporate the theme(s) into their book?)
- Quotes that you like (Are there quotes that are really telling about the book's characters or themes?)
- Tone/mood (Does the story have a creepy feel? Is it funny?)
- Timeline (Especially if the narrative is not in chronological order, or is nonlinear, it helps to create a timeline for the events in the book.)
- Key ideas (This could help a lot with non-fiction books like self-help or a specific topic.)

## Step 3. Get to writing!

**Things to keep in mind as you're writing:**

- The genre of the book? (Memoir? Academic? Fantasy? True Crime?)
- Who is the author? (Are there facts about the author significant to your review?)
- Your audience? (Teachers? College students? Researchers? Enthusiasts?)

Below is an example book review of a fantasy novel called *The Priory of The Orange Tree*. The author finds focus by comparing the novel to G.R.R.. Martin's *A Game of Thrones*, also the first novel in a fantasy series, for a review whose audience is most likely fantasy readers. From that focus, the main ideas the writer develops in the review are the novel's length, pacing, character development, and fantasy world building.

### 1. Introduction

Start with something attention grabbing, something that will make your audience want to read and that also is appropriate for your audience. It could be anything from a quote, to an anecdote, to a joke, you choose! You need a hook to capture the reader's attention. This writer hooks the audience, fantasy readers, by comparing the book to a very popular book that is also the first novel in an epic fantasy series.

If you're missing *Game of Thrones* on TV or just waiting for G.R.R.M to finally release *The Winds of Winter*, this magical, character-driven, 2019 fantasy novel might help pass the time.

Next, introduce your audience to the book by including the title and the authors.

*The Priory of the Orange Tree*, Samantha Shannon's first novel in her *The Roots of Chaos* series, is a "feminist retelling of *Saint George and the Dragon*" whose strong female characters get the job done.

## 2. Summary

Give a preview of the book appropriate for its genre. For example, when summarizing an academic study, you might summarize the type of study the author is writing about or paraphrase the book's controlling idea. For summarizing fiction, memoirs, biography, include some of the main characters, overall narrative structure, and theme. Remember: No spoilers in genres like memoirs, fiction, and even some studies! Ask yourself, would I have wanted to know this before reading the book? You can also sprinkle a few opinions in your summary if it feels natural.

Notice the movement from discussing one character to another to mimic the novel's multiple viewpoints and develop the comparison to *A Game of Thrones*:

Almost a thousand years after trapping the Nameless One, a fire-breathing Wyrms who wishes to rule over all humans, the House Berethnet still stands with Queen Sabran at its head. However, Sabran is still unwed, without a child to continue the line of Queens, and facing assassins, while trying to protect her people from the Wyrms that are slowly gaining ground. Trying to fulfill her duties as both a Chamberer and protector of Sabran, Ead is a Southerner in Sabran's court. Lord Arteloth is cast from the Western Court to be a diplomat in one of the most dangerous Queendoms in the world--a land where they worship Wyrms and denounce Virtudom. Tane, a dragonrider from the East, is caught in between doing what is right and following her dreams. Niclays is ostracized from Sabran's court and sent to the East where he continues in his journey to find the elixir that will grant immortality.

## 3. Your Thoughts (Analysis)

This is the best part: you get to write your own analysis of the book. You can't address every aspect of a book. Choose a few main points to focus on as you discuss the positive and the negative. This is where you can try to convince the reader if the book is worth reading or not.

Notice the main ideas the writer uses in this review are related to length, characterization, and fantasy world building:

Much like *The Song of Ice and Fire*, this novel is split between multiple character's perspectives, each one giving more information about the fantasy world that Shannon has built. While this novel is a very slow start, it picks up about half way through. This isn't to say that the first half isn't interesting; if you like reading royal court intrigue and enjoy character and fantasy world building, this is a novel for you. The world building is spectacular and Shannon puts a lot of thought into each religion without over explaining it. However, at 800 pages, it might be a bit daunting especially with the difficulties of getting through the first 400 pages.

Sabran, Ead, and Loth along with some minor characters that don't get their own perspectives are extremely three dimensional. They have the reader rooting for them the entire time. However, Tane and Niclays seem a bit stunted in characterization. It was hard to grasp who Tane was as a person, although her motives were very clear, and the East is very interesting to learn about from her perspective. Nicolays on the other hand has a deep backstory and clear character, but she is sometimes a very unsympathetic character and does not exhibit much growth until the last few pages.

Something I did really enjoy were the high stakes. If a character messes up it could severely affect them and the plot. It could even lead to death. Shannon does an amazing job with the romance of the novel. It's not too much to take over the entire plot, it's realistic, and it's heartfelt.

## **Conclusion**

You can summarize the things you liked versus the things you did not like and let your reader decide whether or not to read the book. You can give your last opinion on the book: was it worth the read or not? For an academic book you might answer the question, What was the book's contribution to that field of study? For a biography you might comment on accuracy or bias. How you approach the conclusion will depend on the genre of the book and your audience. But however you approach it, summarize your main ideas in the context of your overall opinion of the book. Make sure not to introduce any new information.

Was it worth the read? In short--yes. Although there were a few things I found underdeveloped or rushed, despite the at times daunting 800-page length, *The Priory of the Orange Tree* is definitely worth the read. The plot is compelling, the romance is unique for a fantasy novel, and you will really fall in love with some of these characters, even the minor ones. It might be unfair to compare it to *A Game of Thrones*, but they are fairly similar in worldbuilding for first books of epic fantasy series. It was not my favorite fantasy novel by a long-shot, but I am glad I read it.

