

## **BOOK REVIEW ASSIGNMENT**

(25% of your course grade)

Due date: no later than Monday, November 28 at class. I encourage you to complete the assignment sooner. That said, it would be a very good idea to wait until after we've covered the time period examined in the book before writing your review.

Your book review should be 6-8 pages, double-spaced with normal margins and font size. At the top of the first page, below your name, give complete bibliographic information for the book in the following format: Author's First and Last Names, *Complete Title in Italics* (place of publication, date of publication). An example: Eric Weitz, *Weimar Germany: Promise and Tragedy* (Princeton, 2007). Direct quotations or close paraphrases should be indicated in the text by placing the page number in parentheses at the end of the sentence. In a book review, this--not footnotes--is the normal practice.

### **HOW TO WRITE A GREAT BOOK REVIEW**

#### **I. Your assignment: the three basic tasks**

A good book review will include these three elements:

- 1 *A description of the author's project.* What was the author trying to do? What was his or her aim in writing the book? How did she or he frame the questions? How did she or he propose to get answers to them? In order to do justice to a book, *an essential part* of what you must do is to enter into the author's project and describe it for your audience. This does not necessarily mean that you take the author's approach or views as the last word on the subject (see point three). But you must show that you understand what that approach was.
- 2 *A synopsis.* You should summarize the contents and the main findings of the book. What is the book's *thesis*--its main, central claim--and how does the author make an argument for it? What kinds of evidence are used?
- 3 *Critical evaluation.* Be flexible in how you think about this! It may be that you find a book either completely persuasive, or completely misguided. But there are many possibilities in between. Perhaps it offers a partial perspective on a larger question. Perhaps it raises questions more than it provides answers, by showing that the conventional wisdom won't do, yet leaving us unsure what to put in its place. You will think of other possibilities. Think carefully about the verdict you want to render. It's very rare that a book merits complete approval or complete dismissal. Don't make bland, unsupported judgments such as "this was interesting" or "this was boring."

#### **II. How to read: some tips**

Before you write, think about how you're reading. Don't be a passive reader; be an active reader. Here are some suggestions for things to do and think about as you read. --*Always take notes* as you read (not just afterward).

--Try to get *inside the author's argument*, that is, inside his or her way of thinking about a problem and presenting it.

--*Figure out the author's aims*. Books are written for many different purposes. Is this a piece of scholarly research? a political statement? a contribution to public debate? an attempt to clarify some problem of the author's? or perhaps several of these things?

--*Pay attention to language*. Any author has a language or vocabulary of his or her own. What terms are central to the argument? Is the author using those terms in a special way?

--*Evidence*. What kinds of evidence are used to make the argument?

--*Think about the author's context*. What issues did the author have in mind when writing the book? Introductions and prefaces are often good sources of information on this. For instance, was the author trying to support or refute other authors? To correct misconceptions, or to point out something that has been missed? To make a political or moral point?

### **III. Writing: dos and don'ts**

Like any good piece of expository writing, your book review should have the following qualities:

- 1 Refer in detail to the author's arguments. Don't resort to phrases like "I think" or "it seems to me." You're trying to reconstruct the core of the author's argument. You should pay attention to the major steps and the language with which the author makes his or her case.
- 2 Document your use of sources—in this case, the book you are reviewing. Direct quotes should always be in quotation marks, and paraphrases should be referenced as well. In this case, since you are reviewing only one book, you may put page numbers in parentheses at the end of the sentence.
- 3 Write well. That is, your style should be fluid, and the grammar and spelling should be correct.
- 4 Write a good introductory paragraph. Almost always, this will be the last thing to write—once you know what you have said. My advice: draft an introductory paragraph to get yourself started, and then be sure to go back and revise it after you've written the rest of the paper.
- 5 *Proofread*. Always proofread a paper and make corrections if necessary before turning it in. Do not rely on your word processor to do what's needed. It won't.