BOOK REPORTS AND REVIEWS

A book report briefly summarizes a book and highlights important areas in which the piece increases or relates to a body of knowledge. For example, a book report on *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* might examine the book's portrayal of child abuse if the reader is writing the report for a sociology class. The report would show how the book relates to the subject matter studied in the sociology class. It would also show how the reader had added to her or his previous knowledge of the topic by reading the book. The reader's personal bias about the work should not be included in a report.

In a review, however, the emphasis is on how--and how well--the book, play, musical performance, or artwork conveys its message so that the reader of the review may know whether or not he or she would like to experience the piece personally. A review is a critique of the piece and anything that applies to or affects it. Some ideas to consider include: How do all the different aspects of the piece tie together to give one overall impression? Do some parts distract from what you assume is the purpose of the piece or presentation? How did the piece personally affect you? What was your reaction compared to the rest of the audience or other observers? How were the acoustics (for a musical or theatrical production)? What about the performers--did they do justice to the work? Or for visual art, was the work displayed appropriately? The point is that a review provides an argument about the value of the work or book you are reviewing.

Both reports and reviews may be organized similarly:

I. A brief introduction of the piece--full title of book or work including subtitle, author, characters, setting, point of view (if applicable). A short bit of pertinent background information about the artist or author or other works by her/him can also be included here. You should also be aware that you need to have a thesis, a central claim about the piece that evaluates it based on its purpose or intentions--not based upon what you wish the artist or author had created. In the following review of Stephen Jay Gould's last book, titled "A Grand Finale," Robin McKie includes a minimal version of this information.

"It is ironic that the great evolutionary biologist Stephen Jay Gould [introduction of author]--who wrote so majestically and informatively about life in all its rich, biological intricacy [more introductory material]--has produced a valedictory work so redolent of death."

Note that a book review needs to be headed by a full bibliographic citation that includes the author's name, the book's title, the place of publication, publisher, date of publication, number of pages, and other contents, such as maps and tables. Here is an example:


II. One paragraph (or more) synopsis or summary. Be sure to use the literary present tense when writing about actions occurring within a piece, or about an author's writing within the piece--even if that author is dead--and past tense when discussing the subject of a book or piece. The idea behind the use of literary present tense is that a literary work or any work in a creative medium occurs in the present for the reader/viewer/hearer and therefore should be discussed using the present tense. The second paragraph of McKie's review provides not only a brief summary but also gives an example of the use of literary present tense. Pertinent verbs have been italicized in the passage(s) below.

"Apart from the author's own demise last week, *I Have Landed* is striking for its unexpected images of loss and grieving . . . It is a measure of Gould's zest for life,
and his belief in ordinary human decency, that he nevertheless manages to wring a thoroughly fulfilling book from this miasma of misery."

Another excerpt shows how literary present tense can be used along with the past tense: "In maintaining this stunning output . . . Gould resurrected the scientific essay from near extinction and restored it to the robust, provocative state . . . This one indisputable achievement will remain Gould's prime claim to fame, the popularity of his output also showing, as he says, that 'contrary to current cynicism about past golden ages, the abstraction known as "the intelligent layperson" does exist . . .'"

III. Topic or theme--(two or three paragraphs, one topic each). For book reports, tell what information relates to the subject matter being studied. For a review, explain the significant point or points being made by the artist and critique the piece. In McKie's review, paragraphs three and four focus on how Gould's collection addresses both the World Trade Center bombing and his immigrant grandfather's arrival at Ellis Island exactly 100 years earlier on September 11, 1901. In the essay about his grandfather, Gould is able to witness to "the fragile continuity of life." He is also able to "detect signs of hope from the events" of September 11, 2001. Both examples McKie sees as testament to Gould's belief that "Ordinary kindness trumps paroxysmal evil by at least a million events to one."
Mckie does offer criticism of Gould's work too, stating in one paragraph that "as I Have Landed makes clear, his [Gould's] intellectual stance softened and his opposition to religion and sociobiology moderated. His writing has also become rather orotund and over-complex (his passion for words such as contingent, canonical, and, above all, maximal, is particularly maddening.)."

IV. Reader's (or an audience's) reaction to the piece or what the piece may have taught the reader (or audience): How does the work relate to class material, your life, our society? In a review, what emotions did it arouse? For McKie, while Gould's writing has become sometimes pompous and bombastic, "his range has broadened magnificently as he has perfected his increasingly personalised [sic] approach to his essays. Hence the story of Papa Joe and the fragility of life, as well as his encounters at Ground Zero."

V. Summary and evaluation of topics discussed in the report or review. Show the work's importance, accuracy, or relevance. Would you recommend the work to others? Why or why not? Despite his criticisms of Gould's book, McKie justifies his appreciation of it by pointing to the positive influence all of Gould's writing has had on popular science writing and to the passion with which Gould writes. He ends by expressing his feelings about Gould and all his works very clearly:
"Thus I Have Landed provides us with our last chance to appreciate a Western publishing phenomenon, a writer whose relish of the intricacies of biology and evolution pioneered an explosion of the popularisation [sic] of science but who has never been bettered in the process. For years, I have anticipated the publication of each of Gould's new collection of essays and never once felt let down by them. I shall miss his books profoundly."

Be careful not to spend more than one paragraph summarizing. The bulk of the report or review should be your material: in the case of a review how your knowledge was added to; in the case of a review, your views and opinions, not the author's story or a description of a piece. Use quotations and references to the story or work to back up your opinions, but don't use them to fill up your word limit. They are evidence; do not let them overtake the report or review.

Created by: Lisa Cradit; revised by: Rene' LeBlanc
Spring 2003
STUDENT LEARNING ASSISTANCE CENTER (SLAC)
Texas State University-San Marcos