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how to write a BOOK
REVIEW ~~like Tim Champs~~

daron armstrong
& Friends

**HOW TO WRITE A
GREAT
BOOK REVIEW**

BY AARON ARMSTRONG

*Remember Roger Ebert's dictum: A work is not what it is about, but *how* it is about it.*

—Jared C. Wilson, author of *The Pastor's Justification, Gospel Deeps*

“HOW DO YOU WRITE A BOOK REVIEW?”

I have a love-hate relationship with this question. It’s wonderful to see that people want to know how to do this, and it’s a real privilege that they seem to enjoy mine enough to want to know how I write mine. But—and there’s always a but, isn’t there?—I always feel like a bit of a fraud when I get asked. You see, I have a confession:

Most everything I know about writing good reviews, I learned from other bloggers.

When I first started blogging, I really loved reading Tim Challies’ book reviews. They were thoughtful, in-depth and often entertaining. The first one I remember reading was his lengthy critique of *The Shack*. Reading his reviews made me take a hard look at how I was writing. And I didn’t really like what it showed me.

When I first started writing book reviews, I followed the guidelines from various publishers’ review programs. You know, the ones that tell you where to put the book title, what to title your post, how long it should be, all that kind of stuff. And I hated them, particularly the word count limits. 300-350 words? Seriously? How do you expect anyone to interact with a book in such a small space? Sure enough, in reviews where I attempted to adhere to these requirements, my comments came across as simplistic and trite... just skimming the surface. They also read pretty

*Look for truth as you read, not opportunities
to sound smart.*

—Derek Rishmawy, blogger at *Reformed-ish*

much like every other review out there. I wasn't adding anything of merit.

That had to change.

So I did what any good, responsible blogger would do: I said nuts to the guidelines and started to write as much as I wanted to. This, naturally, freed me up to really begin interacting with the books I was reading. It also allowed me to figure out my own voice, although it took a while to get there.

That's why I'm sharing this little eBook with you. It's not intended to be "how to write a book review like Aaron Armstrong." Honestly, I don't believe I'm pretentious enough to say that my reviews are always worth emulating (at least, I hope I'm not!). Instead, I want you take the principles I've learned over the last several years from writing a couple hundred different reviews, work them into your own routine and go to town!

But it's not just my advice you'll read here: a short while before diving into this project, I asked a few of my friends in the blogging community to offer up some of their best advice for book reviewers. Their advice is worth far more than anything I can offer on my own, so I'm grateful for their contributions.

Alright, with all that out of the way, let's get started shall we?

Keep the summary light and the interaction heavy. Identify key themes and engage them from a biblical worldview. Show the consequences of an idea. Advance the discussion. Be biblical in content, conversational in style, gracious in tone. Aim to illumine, not to impress. Oh, and avoid the word “that” wherever possible.

—Matt Smethurst, associate editor for The Gospel Coalition

So what does it take to write a good review? While there are a number of factors to consider, here are the top six principles that help me write reviews the way I do:

READ TO REVIEW

This might seem like a “duh,” but If you’re like me, you probably read a lot of material for a variety of purposes. This means not everything you read is going to be for a book review—or at least it shouldn’t be. When you go in understanding you’re going to be reviewing a book, it changes *how* you read it.

Knowing I’m going to review it forces me to make sure I’m paying careful attention to what is written. I’m less likely to let the content wash over me, and I’m far more likely to read with a pen in hand (when reading a traditional book) or be highlighting like crazy (if reading on my iPad). I’m always trying to be watchful that I’m really getting what the author is saying

THE “WHO” IS LESS IMPORTANT THAN THE “WHAT”

Whenever I’m reading an author I genuinely enjoy, it’s easy to simply just say “I like it,” without necessarily considering what’s been written. Whether it’s MacArthur, Driscoll, Piper, Sproul,

Critique the book the author intended to write, not the book you were hoping to read.

—Trevin Wax, author of *Clear Winter Nights, Counterfeit Gospels*; blogger at *Kingdom People*

Chan or whoever is the cat's meow, it's important to not let preference for the person dictate approval (or disapproval) of the content.

This is the one principle I see bloggers violate more than any other. We don't ask hard questions of the books we're reading. We just assume everything's ducky because the author is on our "team." It's also a principle I've violated a great many times in the past. There are some books I've reviewed that, in hindsight, I'd be far more critical of today than I was when I first read them. Most of these are written by men whom I admired at the time, but have grown far more cautious of in recent years.

Brothers and sisters, we are not to be sycophants. Don't write a review that sounds like it was written by one.

DON'T FILL-IN-THE-BLANKS

When someone writes a very...ambiguous book, it's tempting to start filling-in-the-blanks with my own theological presuppositions. A lot of books that don't stand up against even the most rudimentary understanding of Scripture have been embraced by many evangelicals. But many of these titles (some of which are *New York Times* bestsellers) are embraced simply because we *do* fill in the blanks.

I remember once having a conversation with a pastor about a well-known Christian figure whose books were kind of sketch. It wasn't so much that what he wrote was wrong (except where it was). The problem was always what he left out. But he never saw the problem with the author simply because he inserted his own theology into the white space. As a result, he never actually read the author's intended message.

When we fill in the blanks, we risk recommending a book that's far more detrimental than it may appear. Review what's written, not what you want to include.

Ask: “What is original about this book? Does it simply repeat what’s said elsewhere or does it really contribute something new and needed?”

—David Murray, author of *Jesus on Every Page*, blogger at *Head, Heart, Hand*

ACKNOWLEDGE YOUR BIASES

This point has a great deal of crossover with the previous two. We need to be aware (as best as we are able) of our own biases and predispositions. This will reflect how we approach books by authors we don't enjoy or who we know hold to a different theological position than we do.

It might be helpful to think about it this way: If you're really not a big fan of the seeker sensitive movement, you're not going to like a lot of what an Andy Stanley or Bill Hybels have to say about how to do "church." But acknowledging that is the first step to being able to see what either man has to say that might be helpful to you.

Using Hybels as an example, while I don't care for his preaching, I do greatly appreciate his insights into leadership—especially his demonstrated humility and transparency. It takes humility (and a fair bit of courage) to acknowledge that the organization you're leading has had to deal with a toxic work culture, as he did at the 2013 Willow Creek Leadership Summit. If we assumed Hybels had nothing to teach us, we'd miss out on what we can learn from his character (even if we disagree with his theology in certain respects).

The same is true for the books we read. Some books I've read have been absolute trainwrecks in most respects, but still have a few nuggets worth learning from. We can and should acknowledge these, even as we voice disagreement with other aspects.

TRY TO BE HUMBLE

Everybody goof's sometimes. Not everyone who says something stupid is a heretic. And not everything I think is wrong actually is. Something I am continually to do (with varying degrees of success) is acknowledge that I can make mistakes and when I do, I need to be corrected. This is where comments from readers can be very helpful, as well as receiving counsel from trusted

As best you can, make sure to figure out the book's main argument. It's sometimes elusive, slithering through the pages like a snake through the grass. Gifted reviewers can snatch it, wrestle with it, and analyze it with a friendly but critical spirit. Doing so serves readers well and honors the important idea that books exist in part to make arguments, and that arguments are worth engaging.

—Owen Strachan, author of *Risky Gospel*

friends. Over the last several years, I've had the great privilege of becoming friends with a number of the men whose blogs I read. Often, when I'm struggling with a particular aspect of a review, or when I'm not sure what I'm writing is coming out the right way, I'll pass it along to one or more of these guys and we'll hash out some of the issues.

On a related note: this has led me to an important conclusion: Tim Challies and I cannot review the same books anymore. We wind up coming to the same conclusions much of the time, and so I generally feel insecure publishing a review after he has.

TAKE YOUR TIME

Although all the above principles are important—even essential—I consider this final one the most important. We need to carefully consider how much space we should give between reading a book and reviewing it.

The answer, of course, is it depends.

Some books require a great deal of time to properly process and critically evaluate. This is work that, very often, can't be done while you're reading the book. You need time to work through it all and make sure you're not making a judgment in the heat of the moment (like when the author writes something that's embarrassingly stupid, for example).

More important, though, is when you're reading a great book—when you're in the middle of it, your fired up, super-excited and ready to give a glowing recommendation. Maybe, though, it's better to give it a few days, even a few weeks, breathing room.

See if the passion you felt for the book is still there. See if you've done anything with the content you've read. Let that temper what you write.

This is my normal practice for book reviews. I typically try to leave as much as four weeks

Authors aren't expecting overwhelming and gushing praise for their work. While unfair or ad hominem criticism is hard to take, substantive evaluation of a book not only serves the reader, but serves the author as well, helping shape the ongoing laboratory of ideas he carries in his mind.

—Daniel Darling, author of *Real*

between reading a book and reviewing it. I need to make sure I'm not just saying something's great and life-changing, but am actually trying to apply the positive take-aways. It's rare that I review anything immediately after reading it. For me, it's just unwise.

I want to be thoughtful and careful about what I say about a book, largely because I don't want to mislead a reader. I also don't want to have to go back and say, "Whoops I changed my mind" unless I really have to (and so far, I think there's only one or two books I've reviewed where I'd probably change a few things about what I've said).

The Bible encourages us to be slow to speak, to restrain our lips (James 1:19; Prov. 10:19); this should be reflected in how we critically evaluate movies, books and articles. It's always better to take a bit of time to think things through (and sometimes seek advice when needed). The results will always be worth it.

All reviews are unavoidably personal and subjective, but if your review says more about you than about the book and its author, you are doing it wrong.

—Jared C. Wilson, author of *The Pastor's Justification, Gospel Deep*s

GOOD QUESTIONS TO ASK WHEN REVIEWING A BOOK

When reviewing a book, asking good questions is essential. We're only going to engage as deeply as what we ask of a book. If we ask simplistic questions, we get simplistic answers. You get the idea, I trust. Here are the five questions I most commonly ask when reading and reviewing a book:

- 1. What is the main idea the author is trying to convey?** Can I figure out what the big idea of the book is and articulate it in one or two sentences?
- 2. How does the author support his/her idea(s)?** Scripture, tradition, history, illustrations from real life examples... every point made needs to be backed up with something. If it's nothing more than "I think," chances are, it's wrong.
- 3. How does the author handle Scripture (if reading a Christian book)?** How an author approaches Scripture is an indicator of their trustworthiness.
- 4. Do I agree with the author's main idea? Why or why not? Can I support my position with appropriate Scripture?** In the same way that an author's assertions must be tested against Scripture, so too must my assessments. If my position cannot be supported by Scripture, it must be rejected.

*Before anything else, strive to explain an author so well,
they'd be nodding their heads along as they read.*

—Derek Rishmawy, blogger at *Reformed-ish*

5. What difference does it make? While there are always some things that you read for which you don't have an immediate practical application, the question of "what difference does it make in my life" is essential for why determining whether or not to recommend a book.

CONCLUSION

This little booklet shouldn't be considered the final word on the subject of book reviewing. All reviewing is subjective; therefore, it's important to remember that there's so much more to learn. And the best way to learn is simply by doing it. Whether the principles I've outlined here are new or familiar to you, I do hope they'll be as beneficial to you as they are to me.

**THANKS FOR
READING!**

If you've got feedback on this resource, I'd love to hear it. Shoot me a line anytime at aaron.armstrong9@gmail.com. For more content, visit www.bloggingtheologically.com.