 **Doc Holley’s Honors Literature Book Review**

**IT IS NOT A BOOK REPORT!**

My Honors Literature book reviews are a little more complex that the typical high school book report. Instead of just explaining what happened in the book, you’ll be required to provide a critical analysis of its contents.

**The Summary**

The first and most important thing to do when writing a college level book review is to actually read the book. It might be tempting to use something like *Spark Notes*, but that won’t give you the knowledge you need to write an effective critique. So read the book carefully, and if possible give yourself some time to reflect on it before starting your paper. When you’re ready to write the book review, the first you’ll need (after the introduction and thesis) is a short summary. Notice the word “short." The summarization should take up no more than a third of your paper, and a forth would probably be better. You don’t have to explain every plot twist and every chapter—just give the reader an overview of what happens in the book and what it’s about. Before you start writing this part of the book report, you might want to figure out what you’ll be covering in the analysis section (see below). That way, you can summarize with an eye towards what you’ll be discussing later on.

**The Analysis**

The bulk of your paper should be an analysis of the book. Instead of just repeating what you read, you’ll be asked to go beyond the obvious and show your understanding of what the text by providing a critique, including, but not limited to, a rhetorical analysis. You won’t be able to critique everything about the book, of course. So again, be sure to read the assignment carefully because your teacher might tell you what to focus on.

If not, choose a specific aspect of the book to build your paper around. Narrowing your focus to a particular character, THEME, relationship, or plot point keeps your book report from rambling and your thoughts from becoming disorganized. (Doc likes it when you tie it to one of the APWH themes!) When in doubt, go with a theme since that approach proves you’ve thought carefully about the novel. Explain the theme’s role in the book, and how it relates to the various HISTORICAL characters and events. Use plenty of concrete examples and a few quotes (not too many—no more than one or two per paragraph).

In any critique, you’ll want to draw from your personal opinions and reactions to the book. But since I am calling this assignment a book review and not a book report, you are expected to actually evaluate the book. In this case, expand on your analysis by including your own (reasoned and supported) opinion on how well the novel is written and whether it does a good job with its stories and themes. Read a few professionally written book reviews online if you’re not sure how to do that.

**Going Outside the Book**

This is a MOST important required duty. And, it can really improve your analysis to go beyond the text and analyze the novel as it relates to the outside world. Learn something about the author, and the time and culture in which the book was written. Consider the author’s intentions and influences. In what ways does this outside knowledge inform your reading of the book, help you understand why it was written the way it was? Professors love it when you treat a book as part of the real world, rather than just an isolated text. Don’t be afraid to use a little research here—just be sure to cite your sources. (MLA style.)

**In Conclusion -** A few final things to consider:

It can be a good idea to read the book, at least parts of the book, more than once. This takes extra time, of course, but you’ll pick up on things during the second read that you didn’t notice the first time around. A second read also lets you reflect on the deeper aspects and themes of the book, since you already know the plot. And you can keep an eye out for good examples and quotes to include in your critical review.

Write about something that’s interesting to you. Book reviews are all about engaging with the text on a personal level. Even in the most boring novel there’s likely one idea or character that grabs your interest. Focus on that—the writing will go more smoothly and the paper’s quality will be higher.

**Classic book review structure is as follows:**

* Title including complete bibliographic citation for the work (i.e., title in full, author, place, publisher, date of publication, edition statement, pages, special features [maps, color plates, etc.], price, and ISBN.
* One paragraph for the thesis statement and the historical significance of the book
* Two to three paragraphs identifying the thesis/theses,
* One to two paragraphs on the author/author’s purpose, and whether the author achieves the purpose of the book.
* Two to three paragraphs discussing the author’s use of rhetorical strategies.
* One paragraph on the intended audience.
* Two to three paragraphs summarizing the book.
* One paragraph on the book’s strengths.
* One paragraph on the book’s weaknesses.
* **Works Cited Page - MLA style**

**Avoiding Five Common Pitfalls**

1. Evaluate the text, don’t just summarize it. While a succinct restatement of the text’s points is important, part of writing a book review is making a judgment. Is the book a contribution to the field? Does it add to our knowledge? Should this book be read and by whom? One needn’t be negative to evaluate; for instance, explaining how a text relates to current debates in the field is a form of evaluation.
2. Do not cover everything in the book. In other words, don’t use the table of contents as a structuring principle for your review. Try to organize your review around the book’s argument or your argument about the book.
3. Judge the book by its intentions not yours. Don’t criticize the author for failing to write the book you think that he or she should have written. As John Updike puts it, “Do not imagine yourself the caretaker of any tradition, an enforcer of any party standards, a warrior in any ideological battle, a corrections officer of any kind.”
4. Likewise, don’t spend too much time focusing on gaps. Since a book is often only 200 to 500 pages, it cannot possibly address the richness of any topic. For this reason, the most common criticism in any review is that the book doesn’t address some part of the topic. If the book purports to be about ethnicity and film and yet lacks a chapter on Latinos, by all means, mention it. Just don’t belabor the point. Another tic of reviewers is to focus too much on books the author did not cite. If you are using their bibliography just to display your own knowledge it will be obvious to the reader. Keep such criticisms brief.
5. Don’t use too many quotes from the book. It is best to paraphrase or use short telling quotes within sentences.

For more help and information, you can check out the following resources .

<https://apps.carleton.edu/curricular/history/resources/study/criticalbookreview/>

<https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/704/01/>

**NOTE:** This information was obtained from various sources over the past several years…with my twist to it.