

ENG-L 495: Senior Seminar in English
Fall 2019 / Instructor: Dr. Paul Cook
Writing an Academic Book Review

For this assignment, you will select a recent(-ish) scholarly monograph (2016 or later) on some element of the massive disciplinary “umbrella” known as modern English studies, which includes such fields and areas as literary studies, critical theory, (history of) literary criticism, rhetoric and composition (writing) studies, rhetorical theory, technical editing, linguistics/critical language studies of all kinds, history of the English language, cultural studies, drama/theatre studies, women’s/LGBTQ+ studies, critical race theory, English education (K-12), writing pedagogy, and on and on.

Academic book reviews typically make two closely-related “moves” for the reader: a good book review (1) will provide a careful overview of the book’s topic(s), themes, major claims or theses, a chapter-by-chapter breakdown of the book’s argument, and a robust discussion of the book’s context (i.e. the academic “conversation” surrounding the book—this is where you will do the bulk of your research) and (2) will provide a thoughtful evaluation of the book’s argument and its contribution to the existing scholarship/critical conversation. This part requires you to do some reading and research beyond the book you’re reviewing, which is why most book reviews have a short Works Cited page of typically 3 to 5 scholarly sources. All book reviews should be between **6 and 8 pages**. Here are some specific pointers on writing good academic book reviews [taken from this article on InsideHigherEd.com](#):

Introduction. All good pieces of academic writing should have an introduction, and book reviews are no exception. Open with a general description of the topic and/or problem addressed by the work in question. Think, if possible, of a hook to draw your readers in.

Summary of argument. Your review should, as concisely as possible, summarize the book’s argument. Even edited collections and textbooks will have particular features intended to make them distinctive in the proverbial marketplace of ideas. What, ultimately, is this book’s *raison d’être*? If there is an identifiable thesis statement, you may consider quoting it directly.

About the author(s). Some basic biographical information about the author(s) or editor(s) of the book you are reviewing is necessary. Who are they? What are they known for? What particular sorts of qualifications and expertise do they bring to the subject? How might the work you are reviewing fit into a wider research or career trajectory?

Summary of contents. A reasonably thorough indication of the research methods used (if applicable) and of the range of substantive material covered in the book should be included.

Strength. Identify one particular area in which you think the book does well. This should, ideally, be its single greatest strength as an academic work.

Weakness. Identify one particular area in which you think the book could be improved. While this weakness might be related to something you actually believe to be incorrect, it is more likely to be something that the author omitted, or neglected to address in sufficient detail.

Conclusion. End your review with a concluding statement summarizing your opinion of the book. You should also explicitly identify a range of audiences whom you think would appreciate reading or otherwise benefit from the book.

Choosing a book to review:

Check out some of the following university presses for some ideas on new titles in linguistics and the history of English:

U of Alabama Press
U of South Carolina Press
Indiana U Press
Vanderbilt U Press
Harvard U Press
Cambridge U Press
Routledge (recent academic titles only)

Once you've found a book (or books) that looks promising, use the [IU Kokomo library homepage](#) to find a copy in the IUCAT.

Starting your book review:

Once you've selected a book to review and received your copy, you'll need to flesh out the major moves of your review. Here are a few guidelines:

- 1.) First, you'll want to make sure you've read at least the Introduction or Preface to the book and scanned the table of contents (ToC) to get a good sense of the book's purpose, thesis/argument, focus/topic, and author.
- 2.) Think carefully about your interest in this book—why does it seem interesting to you?
- 3.) Research a bit of background on the book and its intervention in the ongoing academic conversation. This is what I referred to earlier as the “context” surrounding the book. What conversation does the book and its author attempt to join? How can you tell? This is perhaps the trickiest part of writing book reviews, and I will give you some pointers and strategies as we move forward.
- 4.) Craft a catchy opening that gets the reader's attention but that also introduces and previews the book/topic you're reviewing.