



Australian Journal of  
Defence and Strategic Studies



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## Writing a review

The AJDSS generally commissions book reviews but will consider unsolicited reviews of books, films, podcasts and educational resources relevant to defence and strategic studies.

## Some tips on writing a review for the AJDSS

Our reviews aim be:

- 800 to 2,000 words long
- of recently released books
- relevant to defence and strategic issues
- entertaining, interesting and topical
- helpful.

We see our reviews section as an opportunity within the journal to publish a wide range of different writers in a wide range of styles. We welcome new authors as well as highly experienced ones. The reviews we publish can range in tone from the formal to the familiar. They can offer personal reflections and insights or be scholarly critiques and rebuttals. However, they must still aim to provide the “who, what, where, why and how” that readers need to assess whether a book is suitable for them and worth the investment of their time and money.

A common review structure consists of:

- an introduction, which should include the name of the book and the author
- a synthesis of the book’s narrative or argument (one or two paragraphs at most)
- a short discussion of the issue, context or author
- positive features of the book (backed up with examples)
- constructive critique of where it could have been improved (backed up with examples)
- advice on who will find the book useful/interesting and why
- the reviewer’s personal response to the book
- a conclusion.

Reviews vary, just like books, and there are no hard and fast rules. A review might emphasis current events that make the book relevant or concentrate on critiquing the arguments the author has made. Some books are not easily synthesised in a few short paragraphs, particularly if they raises new, original, contentious or complex ideas.

When you are writing a review ask yourself who, what, where, why and how questions and make sure you answer the most important of them for your readers.

Below are some examples to think about.

## WHO

- Who is the author? What else have they written? What expertise or authority do they have to write on this subject?
- Who is the book aimed at and will it be successful in interesting them?

## WHAT

- What is the book about?
- What did you learn?
- What's good about it; what's bad?
- What is the tone? Is it pompous or straightforward?
- What has been the response to the book from other reviews or in the wider media?
- What else has been written on this topic?
- What biases (if any) does it have?

## HOW

- How has the book been written? Is its structure and style logical and appropriate?
- How successful has the author been at achieving what they set out to achieve? How can you tell?

## WHEN

- When did the events in the book take place? Are they still relevant?
- When was the book written? Have events overtaken the analysis?

## WHERE

- Where is the book set?
- Where has it been published? Has it been translated into other languages?
- Where does this book fit within the field of study on this topic?

## WHY

- Why now? Why has the book been published now?
- Why is it worth reading?
- Why is it important?

You don't have to answer every question above. Some will be more relevant than others. Be critical about what the most important things are for your reader to know.

Here are some other things that are worth remembering.

Your review shouldn't be a detailed retelling of what the book was about or spoiler the best bits! Summarise what the book is about as succinctly and clearly as you can. Reviews aren't very long. Try and summarise the main points in a couple of paragraphs at most.

Unless you are pre-eminent world expert on the topic your reader isn't going to be very interested in what you liked or didn't about a book. They want to know if *they* will like. Try to keep your reader in mind, be objective and balanced. However, if you do have relevant experience and background on the topic it's definitely worth saying so. But be honest with the reader about who you are, your own possible biases, and the extent of your expertise.

In your analysis, provide examples that help illustrate what you want to say and use quotes and references from others where they are helpful, (the AJDSS uses footnotes in the Australian Government Documentary-note style).

While they are short, sadly, writing a review isn't necessarily easy. It requires more than just reading the book. Be prepared to do some background research. You might even need to read other books on the topic or by the same author. Sometimes you may find videos or talks by the author/s promoting the book, which can provide further insight. Research other reviews on the book or information about the author or topic you are reviewing and contrast these perspectives with your own, form your own view.

It doesn't matter whether it is an academic tome or a popular page turner, every book demonstrates the craft of the writer (or writers or editors) and is a product of deliberate choices. What choices has the author made: in style, scope, voice and tone? How have they (or the publishers) chosen to structure and market the book? Evaluate those choices; and whether they have been successful or are appropriate.

The same applies to your own writing. How will you engage your reader and grab their attention? What tone will you use? Think about what your 'hook' will be. It might be that the topic is highly topical or have a celebrity factor (maybe it was been written by someone significant?). You might start your review with a quote or anecdote from the book that is particularly interesting or you might use a personal reflection, such as what drew you to the book.

Like any piece of writing, reviews need re-writing and editing – not only to pick up obvious errors but also to refine your thoughts, clarify your expression and engage your readers. Give yourself time to put your review aside for a few days after you have written it so you can come back to it with fresh eyes.

Still want to write a review for the AJDSS? Send us an email and tell us about the book you would like to review, why, what your approach will be and when you hope to submit it. Our email is [cdr.publications@defence.gov.au](mailto:cdr.publications@defence.gov.au)

We look forward to hearing from you.

Centre for Defence Research