

How to Write an Academic Book Review

Purpose of an Academic Book Review

Academic book reviews, also known as scholarly reviews, are found in scholarly journals and are written for scholars by scholars. Book reviews have quite a few purposes, but they usually inform fellow scholars of the quality, purpose, and argument of a book and explain how it fits into the current literature. A book review can be helpful for fellow researchers so they can decide whether or not to read or purchase the material.

What *Isn't* an Academic Book Review?

An academic book review is **not** a literature review. A literature review synthesizes current published material on a specific topic, provides a summary of other scholars' research, and points out gaps in said research.

An academic book review is **not** an annotated bibliography, even though an entry in an annotated bibliography can look similar. An annotated bibliography focuses more on summary and analysis, while a book review is meant for other scholars/academics to read and decide if they should buy the book. It is not a research paper, so it does not have a hypothesis.

An academic book review is also **not** the type of book review you might find in a K-12 school setting (often referred to as a "book report"). There are some similarities, but academic book reviews focus on the scholarly significance of a book and its arguments.

What *Is* an Academic Book Review?

An academic book review **is** the summary, analysis, and critique of a book written by scholars for scholars. Sometimes a monograph, article, or book will be published, but it might not have groundbreaking research or insight. Because of this, when a scholar writes an academic book review, they consider the other theories and research within the topic and use the book review to describe where it fits in the current framework. Academic book reviews provide critical evaluation, analysis of sources and methodology, and connection to other relevant literature. The scholar will also provide their own critique and explain whether they would recommend the book to other scholars (and why or why not).

Parts of a Book Review

- I. Citation and price
- II. Summary of the main arguments
- III. Analysis and significance
- IV. Relevance and intended audience
- V. Methodology and sources
- VI. Critique and recommendation
- VII. Your name, *your university*

The parts of an academic book review are explained in more depth below. Note that parts 3-5 can be in a different order and mixed together.

Citation and Price

Cite the book using the citation style of your field (MLA, APA, Turabian, etc.). List the current price of a new copy.

Summary of the Main Arguments

After reading the book, summarize the main arguments that the author made throughout their work. Usually, they will explicitly state these arguments in their introduction along with the outline of the organization; with this information, write a sentence or two that restates their argument. If necessary, provide some context for the argument. However, this section is not a full summary of the book. An academic book review provides the main ideas, and since published book reviews typically have a limited word count, the summary should remain brief.

Analysis and Significance

Compare the book and its argument with the other literature on the topic. Discuss its contribution to past and current research and literature. Where does it fit with other research and opinions? Is it groundbreaking or original?

Relevance and Intended Audience

One of the purposes of a book review is to provide your opinion on whom you believe the target audience should be. Part of this involves stating who should or should not read the book. Who would find it useful? College students? Teachers? Fellow scholars, researchers, or scientists?

Methodology and Sources

An important part of the analysis of the book includes examining the methodology of the author's research and the sources used. How did the writers get their data and information? What were their sources? Were the sources and/or statistics reliable?

Critique and Recommendation

A crucial part of an academic book review is your scholarly opinion. The analysis and summary of arguments can be done in a more detached manner, but your fellow scholars want to know if they should put in the time and/or money to read the book. Would you recommend it? What are the benefits, drawbacks, pros, and/or cons? Was it well-written, clear, awkward, interesting?

Were there illustrations or tables of statistics? How was the arrangement and organization of chapters? Were notes or a bibliography included? You don't have to answer all of these questions, just include what you think is important.

Your Name, Your University

To finish it off, if or when you publish your academic book review, you will put your full name at the bottom followed by the name of your university in italics.

Book Review Example with Annotations

<p>Limerick, Patricia Nelson. <i>The Legacy of Conquest: The Unbroken Past of the American West</i>. New York: W.W. Norton, 1987. \$17.05</p> <p>In Patricia Nelson Limerick's book <i>The Legacy of Conquest: The Unbroken Past of the American West</i>, Limerick disproves many misconceptions about America's Western history by demystifying some of the myths of the West and connecting them with sources from multiple different areas of American history. Limerick methodically strips away the nostalgia and alleged innocence to show the complicated nature of western history and the ignored legacy. As she says, "The history of the West is the study of a place undergoing conquest and never fully escaping its consequences" (26). Limerick points out that every issue that started in the 'frontier' era has appeared in the courts or in Congress recently, though not only in the 1980s when the book was written but still today in the 21st century.</p> <p>Limerick argues that Frederick Jackson Turner's claim that the 'frontier' opened and then later shut in 1890 had restricted the study of the west. Instead of a process that ended, she argues that the conquering of the west began in the 19th century, but the process and consequences continue on to this day. The west was and is a meeting place of different cultures, languages, and peoples as groups from around the world and from the eastern United States moved to and met in the West. To address the gaps in western history, Limerick wanted a more comprehensive view, so <i>The Legacy of Conquest</i> is a synthesis of journalists' articles, specialized books, academic articles, and monographs from urban, Chicano, Hispanic, women's history and many other disciplines. However, even</p>	<p>This citation is in Chicago Turabian style, which is the standard for the field of History. The price was found on Amazon.</p> <p>This first paragraph starts with the title and author of the book.</p> <p>It then moves on to provide context while introducing the author's purpose and main argument.</p> <p>This section points out the academic conversation the author is having with previous scholars.</p> <p>This section discusses her sources and methodology during her research. The sources are frequently written as a list, but that's not necessary.</p>
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though Limerick argues that the west was a location and not the process Turner described, she argues that the history that began during westward expansion hasn't ended, especially not its consequences. She emphasizes this point by ending each chapter with a connection to the 1980s, which was present-day during her writing.

Limerick's book is organized by topic, and she chose each chapter with a misconception in mind that she subsequently takes apart and reassembles with new insight and information. Since the conquest of the 'West' began, settlers and the future generations have held a stance that they were innocent victims attacked or injured by misfortune, Native Americans, or the climate. However, Limerick argues that western historians and America as a whole need to face the moral complexities of western expansion. Her first chapter is titled 'the Empire of Innocence' due to America's belief that they did nothing wrong, but Limerick complicates the narrative of victimization by bringing into focus the destruction of the land along with the displacement and death of the peoples already here. As Americans populated the West, they filled the role of both "victim and villain" (p. 54).

Another facet of the western myth is the rugged individualism that has been romanticized in fiction frequently and is referred to fondly in some previous historiography: the determined pioneer, the independent farmer, and the lone cowboy. However, Limerick provides evidence of the exact opposite to the persistent belief that the Americans in the west were free from the federal government. The federal government played a substantial and essential role in westward expansion, especially with appropriating Native American land in many different ways and redistributing it to white settlers. Along with that aid, Limerick points out that the self-reliant settler is also a myth. No one succeeded without other people; that assistance was sometimes from community, but frequently from the government. Farmers, miners, settlers, prospectors, and every budding industry were all subject to the same factors of dependence, which she lists as "capital, nature's good behavior, transportation, markets, and a labor supply" (p. 124).

Throughout *The Legacy of Conquest*, Limerick references Turner's claims in his frontier thesis, but she also

"Limerick's book is organized by topic..." indicates to the reader that the next section discusses the organization and layout of the book so they know what to expect.

The phrase "...and reassembles with new insight and information" indicates the significance.

The phrase "...but Limerick complicates the narrative..." also indicates the significance.

This paragraph begins with context.

The phrase "provides evidence of the exact opposite to the persistent belief" signals to the reader that the author is bringing something new to the scholarship.

labels the place where America met Mexico on their border as “a true frontier, in the European sense, in which two nations confront each other and compete for control of the local resources and routes to opportunity” (p. 228). With this in mind, Limerick argues that western history occurred in the borderlands—the borders of both Mexico and Native American land. Even today, many seem to forget that there were Mexicans living in the American Southwest long before American settlers because the land used to be Mexico. Limerick makes sure to address that along with the Mexican-American War that sparked the western expansion in earnest, a notable trigger being the Gold Rush in California that would not have been possible if the United States hadn’t taken half of Mexico’s land.

Limerick demonstrates throughout her book that Americans then and now want to believe in dichotomies—good versus bad, man versus nature, white versus native (as examples)—but history is never that simple, especially not American western history. America’s history is the history of conquest, and Limerick shows throughout the book that we still live with the aftermath that we refuse to recognize. The legacy of conquest must be reckoned with the same way the South is trying to reckon with slavery, even though many don’t want to face that their national founding myths are all wrong or see that their ancestors were either complicit or villains.

In her final chapter, ‘The Burdens of Western History,’ Limerick draws attention to America’s habit of selective amnesia and defaulting to victim status because with conquest and attempts to rectify injuries caused by it, one person’s loss is another one’s gain. For instance, the contracts signed by the United States government were routinely ignored and violated, yet when recent court rulings acknowledge the original contract, the people on the losing side protest the injustice. Another contemporary debate she brings up is Mexican immigration and bilingual education while pointing out that much of the West used to be Mexico, yet many Americans choose to see Mexicans and Mexican-Americans as an invading group.

The ‘West’ as a concept in popular imagination is rife with myths and misconceptions, but Limerick succeeded in

This paragraph describes another one of the author’s main arguments.

Here is another main argument: “...Americans then and now want to believe in dichotomies...”

Here is an explanation of the title of the book by which also providing another main argument.

Even though this paragraph does explicitly recommend

<p>bringing a new perspective with her collection of secondary sources. <i>The Legacy of Conquest</i> is an important addition to western historiography due to Limerick’s ability to not only reassess much of the scholarship prior to her and her successful debate with the long shadow of Turner’s ‘frontier thesis.’ However, Limerick also created an engaging read with the personal stories of people who epitomize the topic of the chapter or are important to the lasting narrative. Beginning each chapter with a personal narrative eases the reader into the hard truths until she ends the chapter with examples of how the topic extends into the modern age.</p> <p>Because of Limerick and other scholars who have examined western history in the 1980s, there has been much needed contribution to the field in the following decades up until the 2020s. Because of the added scholarship, this book might not be well-suited for a student looking for a complete survey of western history, but Limerick’s titular argument is vitally important when coming to terms with and understanding the history of America and its westward expansion. No student in American classrooms should go without being exposed to the topics Limerick compiled in her book, and certainly should not claim to know American history without recognizing that there is still a legacy of conquest that many Americans ignore.</p> <p>Alex Zvargulis R., <i>San José State University</i></p>	<p>the book, words and phrases like “succeeded,” “important addition,” “engaging read,” and “eases the reader” show a positive opinion of the book.</p> <p>This paragraph pulls together the critique, intended audience, and recommendation.</p> <p>The phrase “...this book might not be well-suited for a student...” includes intended audience and recommendation.</p> <p>The book review ends with a final argument for why the book is important and its significance.</p>
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Activity

Read each sentence. Identify what part of an academic book review it falls under: summary of argument, analysis, significance, relevance, intended audience, methodology, sources, critique, or recommendation. Not every letter will correspond with a sample sentence.

<p>___ 1. Eric Foner’s monograph, <i>A Short History of Reconstruction</i> (2014), demonstrates why he is one of the most formidable experts on Reconstruction and shows the depth and scope of his scholarship.</p> <p>___ 2. One of Foner’s main goals is to counter the damaging, misleading, and long-dominant historiography of Reconstruction that paints Reconstruction as a failure due to the</p>	<p>A. summary of argument B. analysis C. significance D. relevance E. intended audience F. methodology G. sources H. critique I. recommendation</p>
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incompetence of the newly freed slaves and the corruption of the northern Republicans.

___ 3. Foner defines Reconstruction as a collection of unfulfilled promises that was not only a failure, but a tragedy due to the equality promised under the 14th amendment that was never reached.

___ 4. Foner’s monograph contradicts the Lost Cause narrative and also brings into the forefront the agency, importance, and success of freed slaves, thus adding to post-Revisionist historiography.

___ 5. Foner uses extensive primary source research and creates a vital synthesis of secondary material that explores many facets and nuances of Reconstruction.

___ 6. Foner points out that Reconstruction’s efforts toward a much more just and equal society live on through every Supreme Court case that invokes the 14th amendment or Civil Rights legislation. For over a hundred years, the history of Reconstruction was passed over quickly in schools and shoved aside by the Lost Cause narrative, and even today, many do not investigate its ongoing legacy.

Answer Key for Activity

1. H. Critique
2. C, D. Significance and relevance
3. A. Summary of argument
4. C. Significance
5. F, G. Methodology and sources
6. A. Summary of argument

References

Foner, Eric. *A Short History of Reconstruction: Updated Edition*. New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2014.

Limerick, Patricia Nelson. *The Legacy of Conquest: The Unbroken Past of the American West*. New York: W.W. Norton, 1987.

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