

Reading and Writing Book Reviews Across the Disciplines

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Reading and writing book reviews for learned journals plays an important part in academic life but little is known about how academics carry out these tasks. The aim of this research was to explore these activities with academics from the arts and humanities, the social sciences, and the natural sciences. An electronic questionnaire was used to ascertain (a) how often the respondents read and wrote book reviews, (b) how useful they found them, and (c) what features they thought important in book reviews. Fifty-two academics in the arts, 53 in the social sciences, and 51 in the sciences replied. There were few disciplinary differences. Most respondents reported reading between one and five book reviews a month and writing between one and two a year. There was high overall agreement between what the respondents thought were important features of book reviews, but there were also wide individual differences between them. This agreement across the disciplines supports the notion that book reviews can be seen as an academic genre with measurable features. This has implications for how they are written, and how authors might be taught to write them better. A potential checklist for authors is suggested.

Introduction

Book reviews play an important part in academic communication. Most academic journals publish book reviews in addition to their articles. Indeed, some specialist journals publish nothing but book reviews. Nonetheless, not a lot is known about how people read and write book reviews.

In a remarkably wide-ranging and informative article, Miranda (1996) traced the history of book reviewing (from 140 BC) and suggested that the key features of successful reviews were those where the reviewer:

- Evaluated the contribution of the text
- Set the work in a larger, broader context
- Identified the strengths and weaknesses of the arguments
- Involved the reader in the discussion

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Miranda also noted that some book review formats were not used as extensively as they might be, for example: *integrated formats*, where there are several reviews on books on the same subject matter; *multidisciplinary formats*, where one book is reviewed by people from different disciplines; *special issue formats*, where the reviews supplement and complement the theme of selected papers in that issue of the journal; *review essay sections*, where two or three books on the same or contrasting themes are reviewed by the same reviewer; and *rejoinders*, where a review is followed by the author's reply.

Some book reviews, for example Chomsky's (1959) review of Skinner's *Verbal Behavior*, can be very influential, but few studies have been carried out to assess the impact of book reviews on scholarly fields. One exception here is the work by Lindholm-Romantschuk (1998). This study traced the effects of 1732 book reviews appearing in scholarly monographs during 1970–1990 and how they fed into the literature. The author concluded that "Scholarly book reviews are significant indicators of scholarly communication, and can successfully be utilized to trace the flow of information within and across knowledge domains." (p.viii).

Some book reviews, of course, are not prestigious (Henige, 2001; Sabosik, 1988). Furnham (1986) claimed that book reviews are often more idiosyncratic than scholarly. Riley and Spreitzer (1970) called book reviews "second class citizens of (the) scientific literature" insofar as they do not follow the rigors associated with the publishing of scientific articles. Critics such as Pohlman (1967) and Furnham (1986) have advocated that journal editors instigate some sort of peer-reviewing process before accepting a book review for publication. Such a procedure, however, has not proved popular, and book reviews still do not figure highly in the promotion stakes for academics.

Reviews Across the Disciplines

Running through the literature on book reviews is a powerful cross-current suggesting that there are differences between the disciplines in how many reviews are produced,

what purpose they serve, and how they are written. Unfortunately, few studies of book reviews refer to works in all three of the main disciplinary groupings, namely the arts and humanities, the social sciences, and the natural sciences. Lindholm-Romantschuk, for instance, and Carlo and Natowitz (1996) do not consider reviews in the natural sciences. Spink, Robins and Schamber (1998) pooled readers from the arts and the social sciences to contrast their results with those obtained from readers in the sciences. And, of course, there are several studies within single disciplines where disciplinary contrasts are not required. For example, Nicolaisen (2002a) and Riley and Spreitzer (1970) contrasted reviews in social science journals, Champion and Morris (1973) and Snizek and Fuhrman (1979) compared reviews in sociology journals, Schubert, Zsindely, Telcs, and Braun (1984) studied book reviews in chemistry, and Gastel (1993) examined book reviews in medical journals. Indeed, some authors examine the book reviews published in a single journal (e.g., Bressler, 1999; Doessel, 2003).

Nonetheless, even within these single disciplinary groupings, no studies (that I have found) appear to contrast subdisciplines within a major subject grouping. It makes little sense—as Smith, Best, Stubbs, and Robertson-Nay (2002) point out—to consider the range of subdisciplines in psychology (e.g., from brain chemistry to psychoanalysis) as coming from one unitary group, just as it seems equally unwarranted to claim—as does Wareing (2005)—that disciplinary differences “are in many cases social and arbitrary rather than epistemological and essential” (p. 13).

Be that as it may, the research on book reviewing across the disciplines suggests that rather fewer book reviews are written in the sciences and that they serve a rather different function from the reviews in the arts and the social sciences. Scholars in these latter disciplines, it is claimed, rely more on books and monographs for their teaching and research than do scholars in the sciences (Hyland, 2000; Lindholm-Romantschuk, 1998; Spink et al., 1998). Also, consistent with this view, it appears (from visual inspection and other commentators, e.g., Nicolaisen, 2002a) that reviewers in the arts and humanities are likely to cite more academic references in their reviews than are reviewers in the social sciences and the sciences.

One other disciplinary difference can also be discerned in the typography that is used to print book reviews. In a study of book reviews published in each of 25 journals in the arts, the social sciences, and the sciences, I found that only 16% of the scientific reviews were printed in a smaller type-size than were the main articles in their respective journals, whereas this figure was 44% for reviews in the arts journals, and 52% for those in the social sciences (Hartley, 2003). Such a finding is intriguing because it is common knowledge that text set in a smaller type-size is more difficult to read—especially for older people (see e.g., Hartley, 2004a). Perhaps it arises because smaller type-sizes allow more reviews to be squeezed into the limited space available, and it is more necessary to do this in journals in the arts and social sciences because there are more books to review in these disciplines.

The Language of Book Reviews

Book reviews can be considered as a type of academic genre, just like the scientific article. Reading in a genre means that people are familiar with the structure, the format, and the real meaning of the text as opposed to what is actually written. Table 1 lists some typical examples in this context.

Several studies have noted that book reviews tend to be more positive than negative in their evaluations of the books in question (e.g., Bilhartz, 1984; Carlo & Natowitz, 1996; Champion & Morris, 1973). Moore (1978) reported sex differences here in that both men and women reviewers (in psychology) favored elements of books written by members of their own sex more than they did those written by the other sex, and that reviewers of both sexes found more negative elements in books written by men. Snizek and Fuhrman (1979) found that older reviewers tended to write more positive reviews than did younger ones and books (in sociology) by older scholars received more positive evaluations than did books by younger colleagues. Hirsch, Kulley, and Efron (1974; as cited by Schubert et al., 1984) also found that (with reviews in the arts and social sciences) that the higher a reviewer’s status the more favorable the review. However, no significant differences were found between the evaluations of senior versus junior academics writing reviews in the arts in the electronic journal *H-Net Reviews* (McGrath, Metz, & Rutledge, 2005).

Recently, Hyland (2000) has contrasted the ways in which reviewers in different disciplines handle praise and criticism

TABLE 1. Book reviews as a genre: hidden meanings understood by readers.

‘This is a surprising book’	<i>This is better than expected</i>
‘A mixed bag’	<i>Not much in this but one or two chapters worth thinking about</i>
‘A useful book for the library’	<i>Not very exciting</i>
‘The discussion is somewhat abstruse’	<i>I could not understand much of this</i>
‘For the most part this is a thorough, lucid and well-argued book but a few weaknesses can be noted. First....’	<i>That’s done the praise bit, now lets get down to the criticisms</i>
‘In my view more scholarly references would be better for the readers of this text than the par-boiled information referred to on web sites’	<i>This is a light weight text and/or My scholarship is superior to that of the authors</i>
‘The author has presented opposing views fairly, although instances of bias are detectable by the omission of some critical references’	<i>He has left out my key paper on...</i>
‘This is a useful account of unastonishing work’	<i>Oh dear...</i>

Bressler (1999, p. 709), comments: ‘The reviewer is able to compress complex ideas into a snappy 600 words and to substitute veiled allusion for systematic argument because he can trust his readers to decipher the message’

in their assessments of the texts that they are reviewing. Hyland noted considerable disciplinary differences in the amounts of overall criticism and in the balance of praise and critique in 28 reviews taken from seven different disciplines spanning the arts–science array. Thus, for example, praise and criticism were equally balanced in reviews in journals in the arts and social sciences, but reviews in the sciences contained twice as much praise as criticism.

Amabile (1983) put forward the interesting suggestion (and tested it with undergraduates) that negative book reviewers were seen as more competent and intelligent than were positive reviewers. Furnham (1997), however, failed to replicate this finding in a better-designed, but still not fully adequate, study. Here negative book reviewers were seen as having less literary expertise, competence, and intelligence.

Finally, in this section, I should note that there have been some attempts to relate the degree of favorableness or otherwise of book reviews to the books' citation rates. Nicolaisen (2002b), for example, compared the ratings of favorableness of reviews to sociological monographs in *Contemporary Sociology* with their citation rates in *SocSci Research* (Thomson ISI, Philadelphia, PA). His results showed a j-shaped curve: Monographs with highly favorable and favorable reviews were highly cited relative to those that received neutral or negative reviews.

The Structure of Book Reviews

Motta-Roth (1998) examined the organization of book reviews in the fields of linguistics, chemistry, and economics. Motta-Roth found that these disparate book reviews shared a number of what she called “rhetorical moves”—much along the same lines as those distinguished by Swales in his study of introductions in scholarly articles (e.g., Swales & Feak, 1994). Working with 20 book reviews in each of the three disciplines, Motta-Roth outlined four such moves, each comprised of one or more “sub-functions.” These moves and their functions allow readers and writers to recognize different texts as being examples of the same genre.

Table 2 shows the four main moves and a number of possible sub-functions within each one. Motta-Roth suggested that each main move was usually associated with the start of a new paragraph. Nicolaisen (2002c) found that all four of these moves could be detected in over 80% of 60 book reviews published in nine core library science journals.

Reading Book Reviews

Spink et al. (1998) examined how faculty in different disciplines utilized book reviews. They reported that most faculty in a large American university had read between 1 and 10 book reviews within a 1-month period. Members of the humanities and social science faculties ranked “critical comments by the reviewer” and the “subject authority of the reviewer” slightly higher in their rankings of criteria for evaluating a book review than did members of the science and technology faculties—who placed “content description”

TABLE 2. Rhetorical ‘moves’ in scholarly book reviews.

MOVE 1 INTRODUCING THE BOOK	
Sub-function 1.	Defining the general topic of the book
Sub-function 2.	Informing about potential readership
Sub-function 3.	Informing about the author
Sub-function 4.	Making topic generalisations
Sub-function 5.	Placing the book in its field
MOVE 2 OUTLINING THE BOOK	
Sub-function 6.	Providing a general view of the organisation of the book
Sub-function 7.	Stating the topic of each chapter/section
Sub-function 8.	Citing extra-textual material
MOVE 3 HIGHLIGHTING PARTS OF THE BOOK	
Sub-function 9.	Providing specific evaluation
MOVE 4 PROVIDING GENERAL EVALUATION OF THE BOOK	
Sub-function 10.	Definitely recommending the book
Sub-function 11.	Recommending the book despite indicated shortcomings
Sub-function 12.	Neither recommending or disqualifying the book
Sub-function 13.	Disqualifying the book despite indicated positive aspects
Sub-function 14.	Definitely disqualifying the book

Note. Based upon Motta-Roth (1998) as presented by Nicolaisen (2002c). Copyright © 2002. Reproduced with permission of Greenwood Publishing Group, Inc., Westport, CT.

first. The humanities and social science faculty members however, rated book reviews as equally useful for their teaching and research as did science and technology faculty.

Estimates have been made as to whether or not academics are more or less likely to read the book reviews than the research articles within a particular journal. Stowe (1991), for instance, reported readership data that indicated that book reviews were the most widely read feature in the *Journal of American History*. More recently I reported that in the electronic version of one volume of the *British Journal of Educational Technology* there were 790 “hits” for the most popular article, next came 436 for the book reviews, and then 433 for the next most popular article (Hartley, 2003). The hits for the remaining articles ranged from 407 to 67. However, in another article in the same journal, Richardson (2003) reported that “book reviews are among the least read parts of professional and academic journals” (p. 226).

In response to this remark, I assessed the hit rates for the book reviews and research articles published in the *British Medical Journal (BMJ)* from January to June, 2004, using the data provided in their electronic “hit parade.” Table 3

TABLE 3. The average numbers of “hits” for book reviews, abstracts, and texts of academic articles published in the first week of each month in the *British Medical Journal* from January to June, 2004.

	Book reviews (N = 10)	Abstracts (N = 16)	Full-text (N = 16)	PDF version (N = 16)
Average	634	820	1433	948
SD	210	283	973	550

Note. One article that received over 9000 hits was excluded from these calculations.

shows the results. It can be seen that, indeed, Richardson was correct as far as the *BMJ* is concerned.

Such differences again suggest that there might be disciplinary differences in the importance that people attach to book reviews and that differences will result according to the nature of the journals being discussed. The *Journal of American History* publishes approximately 150 book reviews in each issue. The *British Journal of Educational Technology* at that time was published in four parts per year, with approximately 10 book reviews in each part. The *BMJ*, by contrast, is a medical journal that is published weekly, and it does not always contain a book review in each issue.

Writing Book Reviews: Advice

Advice for academics writing book reviews comes, generally speaking, in two forms. The first of these is in articles and chapters published in scholarly journals and textbooks. The second is more specific and emanates from the editors of the journals seeking book reviews.

The advice published in articles and textbooks tends to be fairly general but it is often illustrated with examples relevant to specific subject matter. Typical examples can be found in the publications of Bellardo (1985), Cortada (1998), Day (1998), Parker and Riley (1995), Simon (1996), and Thompson (1991). Surprisingly, there is less general advice published than one might imagine. This might, in part, be a consequence of the fact that (unlike in the UK) undergraduates and secondary school students in the United States are routinely taught how to write book reviews and advice is freely available on the Web.

Stowe (1991) comments that the literature on book reviewing, "is not very good; (it is) written by editors and not by reviewers, it tends to lists of do's and don'ts or reminiscences of hardships in dealing with late reviewers and wounded authors" (p. 592). However, King (1978), Miranda (1996), and Sarton (1960) have provided some highly readable and interesting pieces in this genre. Sarton's essay is in fact largely based on notes written in the 1920s and 1930s, and is thus doubly interesting, although somewhat polemical.

Stowe provides a more evidence-based article drawing upon the results from a readership survey of the *Journal of American History* conducted in 1989. Here about 750 readers (8% of the subscribers) said that they wanted:

- A straightforward account of what the book was about
- A critique of the book's soundness
- An attempt to place the book in its historical context
- More lively writing
- More information about the book's intended audience

These readers were more divided when it came to discussing the length of the reviews. Most were satisfied with the 500 words allowed but some wanted more and some less. They were even more divided over whether or not they wanted to see reviews written by distinguished scholars or

by newcomers to the field (because these latter reviewers reflected more the readership). Some readers wanted more feisty writing, and some less tendentious reviews.

In the light of these comments, Stowe advocated few changes for his book reviewers. In particular, he felt it unwise to impose explicit criteria on how book reviews should be written for his journal. He concluded that book reviews were, in fact, a kind of conversation, a vernacular form of scholarly talk that might take many forms.

Writing Book Reviews: Editorial Instructions

Different journals have different requirements for book reviews. Book reviews can vary in their length, style, and purpose, to list just three interacting variables. Editors usually provide instructions on these matters for potential book reviewers.

To assess the kind of advice given, and its frequency, I wrote to the editors of 30 academic journals to ask them about their procedures, and for copies of any materials that they supplied to their reviewers. Additional material was also gleaned from journal Web pages. Here I summarize briefly the kinds of information provided by these editors for their book reviewers under two subheadings: technical details and specific guidance.

Technical Details

Most journals provide instructions on what might be called technical details. These usually start with some indication of the required length, and the advice about content is often minimal, for example: "Individual book reviews should be between 800 and 1200 words in length, depending upon the amount of attention which you feel the book merits" (*Studies in Higher Education*). Indeed, this is often all the advice that is given. Editors clearly expect that their reviewers will know how to proceed. Some editors temper this lack of guidance, however, by sending new reviewers copies of examples of good reviews from recent issues of their journal (e.g., *The British Journal of Psychology*). Others promise to provide assistance for those who have never written a book review before (*Lesbian and Gay Psychology Review*).

Following this there may be advice on the layout ("Reviews should be typed double-spaced."). For some journals a good deal of attention is given to how to head the review with the appropriate format for the journal (e.g., Author—surname first, date of publication, title—in bold, place of publication, publisher, number of pages, ISBN number, price). Similarly, there are often instructions on how to end the review with the reviewer's name and institutional affiliation, and perhaps some biographical notes.

Again, with some instructions, much space is devoted to how to cite quotations from the book being reviewed, and how to provide references and/or footnotes. One or two journals explicitly forbid such details: "Please use references only sparingly, if at all." (*The Psychologist*).

Finally there are instructions for submitting the finished review, for example: "Please send your review by 6th August to meet the November deadline."

Specific Guidance

Some journals provide little more than these technical details. However, there are exceptions. The *American Historical Review*, for example, provides eight pages of notes on its Web site, which explain the rationale underlying the procedures used. And the *Journal of the Medical Library Association* also provides potential book reviewers with lengthy notes on the aims and scope of the journal, together with a paragraph on what the content of the review might contain:

Reviews should contain a brief overview of the scope and content (of the book being reviewed) so that readers can determine the book's interest to them. Reviewing each chapter of a book is not necessary. For a research or historical work, please comment on its significance in relation to the focus area as well as to the field as a whole. For an applied or descriptive work, be sure to comment on its usefulness. In both cases compare the book with similar publications in its area and indicate its potential audiences, where relevant.

Other journals go even further than this, for example: "The editor encourages reviewers to devote special attention to the political assumptions and discussions in the book under review." (*Law and Politics Book Review*).

In addition there are sometimes suggestions about style: "It is not required that every review contain at least one negative remark. Selective detail is refreshing: encyclopaedic detail—as in a chapter by chapter outline—is rarely called for." (*American Journal of Physics*). "Your review should be as clear, simple and readable as possible . . . Avoid parochial references; explain acronyms and technical details if you have to use them—fewer than half our readers live in the UK . . ." (*British Journal of Educational Technology*).

One or two journals remark on the possibility that a reviewer, having examined a book, may not wish to review it, and should therefore return it for re-assignment. Others comment on more ethical matters, e.g., "Professional ethics require that you do not review a book when an overriding sense of personal obligation, competition or enmity exists." (*Law and Politics Book Review*). *Nature* requires its book reviewers to sign certain disclaimers (e.g., that they have not been in dispute with the book's author) before their review can be published.

Some editors accept unsolicited reviews, provided that they meet the required standards. As one editor wrote, "I strongly encourage unsolicited reviews." (*Journal of Technical Writing and Communication*). But others are more cautious, for example: (a) "Book reviews are commissioned and unsolicited reviews are unlikely to be acceptable." (*Essays in Criticism*), or (b) "The journal does not publish unsolicited reviews. However, if you would like to be added to our database of potential reviewers, please fill in our potential reviewers' data-sheet." (*The Hispanic American Historical*

Review). Some editors are blunter: "Unsolicited book reviews are not accepted." (*American Historical Review*).

And then there is the role of the lonely editor. One such person wrote, "I feel obliged to write reviews myself pretty regularly, since this does guarantee that something appears in each issue!"

New Technology

Just as the methods of writing, printing, and publishing academic articles are changing dramatically with the advent of new technology, so too are the methods of book reviewing. There are now a number of journals where the editors do not select personally an individual author to review a particular book: Here a list of books received is distributed by e-mail attachments to a panel of reviewers and/or readers, who can then select one from the list (e.g., *British Journal of Educational Technology*, *H-Net Reviews*, *Law and Politics Book Review*, *PsycCRITIQUES*, *Studies in Higher Education*). These reviewers do not need to worry about the niceties of presenting the authors' initials, ISBN numbers, etc., as this is done automatically for them. Completed book reviews are submitted by e-mail or downloaded directly using electronic editing software. One or two journals even provide electronic templates for reviewers to follow when writing their reviews (e.g., *International Journal of Commerce and Management*).

Aims of the Study

The aims of the present study are to assess by questionnaire how academics in the arts and humanities, the social sciences and the natural sciences both read and write book reviews. No study to my knowledge has done this separately (a) for the three major discipline groupings, and (b) where the participants have been explicitly identified as both readers and writers of book reviews.

Method

An initial questionnaire was constructed on how academics both read and write book reviews, and this was then piloted. The questionnaire was revised each time after one respondent had completed and discussed it with the present author. There were 11 such reiterations primarily involving academic staff from the arts, social sciences and the sciences at the University of Keele. These preliminary trials served to ensure that all of the issues that arose in these discussions were covered in the final version. This final version was then presented in an electronic format for use in the present study. (A copy can be found at <http://www.keele.ac.uk/depts/ps/jimh/jim.htm>.)

The questionnaire was sent to colleagues in the arts, social sciences, and sciences, typically by using electronic mailing lists. Respondents were asked to indicate their gender, their academic position, and their subject discipline in terms of the arts, social sciences, and sciences; the responses were

TABLE 4. Characteristics of the sample.

	Respondents who had read and written reviews		Respondents who had read but not written reviews		Total
	Men	Women	Men	Women	
Arts	26	26	—	—	52
Social science	20	22	04	07	53
Science	26	20	10	05	51

Note. Countries represented: Australia (6); Belgium (2); Brazil (1); Canada (11); China (1); Costa Rica (1); Croatia (1); Cyprus (1); Denmark (1); Finland (1); France (3); Germany (4); Hungary (4); India (2); Israel (2); Italy (2); Jamaica (1); Latvia (1); Mexico (1); Netherlands (5); Norway (1); Poland (1); Serbia (1); Spain (2); Sweden (2); Switzerland (1); Thailand (1); UK (68); USA (24); unknown (2). A more detailed breakdown of the sample is available on request.

anonymous unless the respondents requested to be kept up-to-date with the findings. The questionnaires were distributed until at least 50 people in each group had completed them. Several disciplines were represented in each subgroup but the highest proportions were represented by members of *H-Net* in the arts, by members of the book reviews panel for the *British Journal of Educational Technology* in the social sciences, and by members of the European Association of Scientific Editors in the science group. Most respondents came from the United Kingdom and the United States, but there were a broad range of nationalities represented and, in all, there were respondents from 29 different countries. Table 4 shows the distributions of these respondents in terms of those who both read and wrote reviews, and those who had only read reviews.

Finally, a small substest was carried out with separate respondents to check whether or not the answers to one particular question (“When you write reviews, what are the main features that you try to include?”) were affected by having answered earlier a similar question (“What features of an academic book review do you value?”)

Results

The overall results from the three groups (arts, social sciences, and sciences) were surprisingly similar, and so too were the results from the male and female participants. Accordingly I shall present only these overall results here and note in passing any subgroup differences where they appeared. (More detailed breakdowns of these data according to the three subject groups are available on request.)

Reading Book Reviews

The first part of the questionnaire asked about the participants’ experiences and thoughts about reading book reviews. Most of the respondents in all three groups reported reading up to five reviews a month and most of them rated this

TABLE 5. Ratings of the value of book reviews for teaching and research.

Question: How useful are book reviews for your teaching/for your research?		Teaching	Research
Arts	Useful or very useful	60%	85%
Social sciences	Useful or very useful	51%	72%
Sciences	Useful or very useful	25%	50%

activity to be *useful* (using a 5-point scale where 1 = *very useful* and 5 = *not at all useful*).

Two questions asked about the usefulness of book reviews (a) for teaching, and (b) for research. Here the participants in each group reported—on a similar scale—that reviews were more useful for their research than they were for their teaching. This is shown in Table 5. These data also show that members of the arts rated book reviews as more useful for these purposes than did members of the sciences (with the social sciences in between). These differences were, however, not statistically significant ($\chi^2 = 0.99$).

On the next question approximately two thirds of the sample in all three groups indicated that they read only those book reviews that were pertinent to their interests, but approximately one third said that they read all of the reviews in their specialized and more popular journals. In response to questions about purchasing books based upon reading book reviews the figures were again similar for the three groups, with approximately 60% of the respondents “sometimes” or “often” purchasing books for their own use and for their institutions.

Table 6 lists the items in an academic book review that the participants thought to be of value. These items are arranged in rank order following the modal responses for each group (where each item was judged on a scale of 1–5, where 1 = *highly valued* and 5 = *not valued*). It can be seen that only one item, “A straightforward account of what the book is about,” received a modal rating of 1, two clusters received modal ratings of 2 and 3, and two items received low ratings overall. Thus, there were few features that were viewed negatively when the results as a whole are considered, but there were, of course, quite wide differences between the individuals on each item.

Interestingly, enough of the distributions of the responses from the three groups differed on the last two items shown in Table 6. Here Mann-Whitney *U* tests showed that the scientists placed a significantly higher value than did the social scientists on including the page numbers of a book being reviewed ($U = 846, z = 3.29, p < .001$). And, similarly, the scientists placed a significantly higher value than the arts group on including the price of the book being reviewed ($U = 704, z = 4.10, p < .001$).

The participants were next asked to indicate if they could recall ever reading an outstanding book review (and if so, to nominate it), and if they had ever read a dreadful review (which they were not asked to nominate). Here the responses of the three groups were very similar, with higher percentages

TABLE 6. Items valued in book reviews.

Modal rating			Item
Arts	Social science	Science	
1	1	1	A straightforward overview of what the book is about.
1	2	2	A critique of the argument of the book.
2	2	2	An evaluation of the book's academic credibility.
2	2	2	A comparison with other books in the field.
2	2	2	An assessment of the book's usefulness for its intended audience.
3	2	2	Information about the intended audience.
1/2	2/3	3	A substantial as opposed to a brief discussion.
2	3	3	An attempt to position the book in its historical context.
3	3	3	A well-known person as author of the review.
3	3	3	A chapter-by-chapter structure.
3	5	2	Information about the number of pages.
5	3	2	Information about the price.

Note. Each item was rated on a 5-point scale where 1 = *highly valued*, 3 = *neutral*, and 5 = *not valued*. Arts, $N = 52$; social science, $N = 53$; science, $N = 51$.

being reported by the arts group than the science group in each case, and with the social scientists somewhere in between. The actual data were 77%, 47%, and 43% for the three groups recalling an outstanding book review, and 73%, 58%, and 51% for recalling a dreadful one. These differences between the three groups were, however, not statistically significant ($\chi^2 = 0.68$).

Only 10 of the respondents nominated an actual outstanding book review but some of the comments about outstanding book reviews recalled by them and the others included the following:

- Incisive pinpointing of the strengths and weaknesses of the book
- Comprehensive yet succinct
- Providing a good critique of theory in the field and the place of the book within it
- Went beyond criticisms to draw conclusions of much broader importance
- Indicated how the reviewer's views had changed as a result of reading the text
- Helped the reader to get a fresh angle on the text

- Displayed awesome scholarship
- Made me want to buy the book

Some of the characteristics of the dreadful book reviews were listed as follows:

- Poor writing
- Reviewer inappropriate to the task
- Reviews containing incorrect and/or insubstantial claims and references
- Reviews which were all content and no critique
- Reviews which failed to discuss the book's argument and worth
- Reviews written to show the superiority of the reviewer
- Reviews, which were too short, long, terse, shallow, pedestrian, self-serving, bitchy, negative, sarcastic...

Finally, in this section of the questionnaire the respondents were asked to nominate from a list of suggestions made in the pilot studies the ones that they thought might enhance the academic standing of book reviews. Table 7 shows the percentages in each group checking these various suggestions. Although it is clear that some suggestions were more popular

TABLE 7. The percentage of the respondents nominating items that might enhance the academic standing of book reviews.

Percentage of nominations			Item
Arts	Social science	Science	
60	50	41	If institutions gave academic credit for writing book reviews.
50	47	49	If the viewpoints expressed were supported by academic references.
40	45	41	If journals named annually their 'outstanding review of the year.'
19	34	32	If the name and affiliation of the book reviewer were given more prominence.
25	23	22	If reviews were peer reviewed.
02	13	14	If reviews were printed before the articles in the journal.
08	06	08	If reviews were printed in the same type-size as the articles.

Note. Nominations from arts, $N = 52$; social science, $N = 53$; science, $N = 51$.

TABLE 8. The percentage of respondents writing book reviews in the year previous to this study.

	Number of reviews			
	0	1-2	3-4	5 or more
Arts (<i>N</i> = 52)	17	52	25	06
Social science (<i>N</i> = 42)	12	33	36	19
Science (<i>N</i> = 36)	17	61	17	06

than others were, it is also clear that there were no significant differences between the respondents in each group.

Writing Book Reviews

The second part of the questionnaire asked about the participants' experiences and thoughts about writing book reviews. Here I present the data from all of the respondents who had written book reviews (see Table 4).

Table 8 shows the percentage of respondents in each group who had written book reviews in the year previous to this inquiry. (Some respondents who reported that they had not written any in the previous year explained that they had written reviews in the past and they continued to answer the additional questions on their experiences and thoughts.) The data in Table 8 indicate that members of the social science group had written more book reviews than had the others, and this difference was statistically significant when the data from the four columns were collapsed into two (0-2 and 3 or more) ($\chi^2 = 9.78, df = 2, p < .01$).

A related question at this point asked the participants if they had ever submitted any unsolicited book reviews to journal editors and, if so, whether or not these had been accepted for publication. (As noted in the Introduction, some journals will not consider them.) Again, higher numbers were reported here for the social science group—31% submitted/24% accepted versus 15% submitted /15% accepted

for the arts, and 28% submitted/22% accepted for the sciences, but these differences were not statistically significant ($\chi^2 = 4.62, df = 2, ns$).

Table 9 shows the percentages of the participants in the three groups who checked various reasons that had led them to write a book review. Somewhat obviously, "An invitation by an editor" ranked highest (even from those choosing books from an electronic menu), but the data in Table 9 also indicate that there are both instrumental and altruistic reasons for writing book reviews. Here there were some significant differences between the proportions checking various reasons for writing book reviews in the three groups. Thus, a significantly higher proportion of the arts group and the social scientists than the scientists checked "I initially think a book will be an important contribution" ($\chi^2 = 13.15, df = 2, p < .01$), "I wish to clarify my own ideas about a set of issues in the field" ($\chi^2 = 12.57, df = 2, p < .01$), and "I think it useful for my c.v. to have written a book review" ($\chi^2 = 6.44, df = 2, p < .05$). In addition, a significantly higher proportion of the arts group checked "I am flattered to be asked" ($\chi^2 = 6.65, df = 2, p < .05$), and a significantly higher proportion of the social science group checked "I conclude that the book is an important contribution" ($\chi^2 = 7.00, df = 2, p < .05$) and "I think that the argument needs a rejoinder" ($\chi^2 = 6.13, df = 2, p < .05$).

Table 10 lists the main features of book reviews that the reviewers in each of the three groups had tried to include in their reviews. Here there were four significant differences between the groups. As in Table 5, the scientists appreciated more both the value of page numbers and the price of the book than did the people in the arts ($U = 434, z = 3.87, p < .001$, and $U = 383, z = 4.35, p < .001$, respectively). Relatedly, the scientists also appreciated information about the format (hardback/paperback) more than did the arts group ($U = 424, z = 3.97, p < .001$). Another feature appreciated more by the scientists than the people in the arts was, perhaps unsurprisingly, how well the text was supported by tables, diagrams, and illustrations ($U = 484, z = 3.43, p < .001$).

TABLE 9. Reasons for writing book reviews.

Arts	Percentage agreeing		Item
	Social science	Science	
73	67	78	I am asked to by the editor.
52	62	56	I wish to inform my colleagues about the value (or otherwise) of a new book that may be of interest to them.
58	38	44	I will get a free copy of the book.
48	29	19	I initially think a book will be an important contribution.
44	50	11	I wish to clarify my own ideas about a set of issues in my field.
42	33	22	I think that the title sounds interesting.
35	14	22	I am flattered to be asked.
27	36	11	I think it useful for my c.v. to have written a book review.
19	33	08	I conclude that a book is an important contribution.
13	21	03	I think that the argument needs a rejoinder.

Note. Arts, *N* = 48; Social science, *N* = 42; Science, *N* = 36.

TABLE 10. Items chosen by writers of books reviews to be included in book reviews in rank order.

Modal rating			Item
Arts	Social science	Science	
1	1	1	Clear writing.
1	1	1	An early paragraph saying what the book is about.
1	2	2	A critique of the argument of the book.
2	1	2	An evaluation of the book's academic credibility.
2	1	3	An attempt to position the book in its historical context.
3	1	2	Information about the book's intended audience.
2	3	2	A comparison with other books in the field.
3	2	2	An assessment of the book's usefulness for its intended audience.
4/5	3	2	How well the text is supported by tables/diagrams/ illustrations.
4	4	3	A chapter-by-chapter account of the content.
5	3/4	3	Information about the format (e.g., paperback).
5	4	3	Information/comment about the price.
5	4	3	Information about the length (i.e., page numbers).

Note. Each item was rated on a 5-point scale where 1 = highly valued, 3 = neutral, and 5 = not valued. Arts, N = 48; Social science, N = 42; science, N = 36.

These results closely match those presented in Table 6; so there is considerable agreement in these data between what readers of book reviews like and what writers of reviews try to provide. This, of course, might not be surprising, given that the data came from the same people in each condition.

To check out whether or not answering the earlier question might have affected answering the later one these single questions were given independently to two groups of additional respondents. The first question (What features of an academic book review do you value?) was sent to members of an electronic mailing list of academics interested in higher education. The second question (When you write book reviews, what are the main features that you try to include?) was sent to book reviewers for *Studies in Higher Education*. There were 12 respondents from the first group and 10 from the second, almost all social scientists. Modal rankings were obtained on these questions for both groups and these were compared with those given for the social scientists shown in Tables 6 and 10. Spearman's rho correlations between the rankings of the two sets of data were 0.87, ($t = 5.64, df = 10$) for question 1 and 0.80 ($t = 4.37, df = 12$) for question 2. Both of these correlations were highly statistically significant. Thus, there was some suggestion that responses to question 2 might have been slightly affected by answering question 1 previously (by the respondents in the main study) but nothing to suggest that this was sufficient to deny the validity of the results.

The participants in the main study were asked whether or not they used roughly the same approach each time they wrote a review, or whether what they wrote varied according to the book review in question. Table 11 shows that the majority of the responses (just over a half) indicated that their response varied according to the book in question and about one third said that they "could not say," as they did not feel they had written enough book reviews to formulate a

TABLE 11. The percentage of respondents indicating that their approach to reviewing was "much the same" or "varied" according to the book.

	"Much the same"	"Varies"	"Can't say"
Arts (N = 48)	23	52	25
Social science (N = 42)	24	50	24
Science (N = 36)	08	58	33

judgment. Although a smaller proportion of the scientists than the others reported "much the same" approach to reviewing different books, there were no significant differences between the groups in their distribution of responses to this question ($\chi^2 = 4.05, df = 4, ns$).

In addition the participants were asked a number of questions about how writing a review compared with writing an article. In analyzing the responses to this question (where the respondents were asked to rate on a 5-point scale how similar certain activities were) I first excluded the responses of those participants who in the earlier question had indicated that they had not written enough reviews to comment.

Table 12 shows that the remaining participants disagreed, by and large, with the statements that book reviews required more crafting, or required writers to use their background knowledge more, and they were more neutral on whether or not book reviews allowed them more freedom to air their views. However, the participants did agree that reviews were easier to write than articles. Only one difference (between the sciences and the arts) was statistically significant in these data, and that was where the scientists judged that reviews allowed them to use their background knowledge more ($U = 259, z = 2.61, p < .05$). It is not clear what weight to put upon these findings in Table 12, however, as most of the participants in all three groups agreed that writing reviews was not really comparable to writing articles. Several

TABLE 12. How does writing an academic book review compare with writing a paper?

Modal ratings			Item
Arts	Social science	Science	
1	2	1	Not really comparable
5	5	4	Reviews require more crafting
4	3	2	Reviews require you to use your background knowledge more
4	2	2	Reviews give you more freedom to air your views
1	2	2	Reviews are easier to write

Note. Modal ratings on a 5-point scale where 1 = *strongly agree*, 5 = *strongly disagree*. Arts, *N* = 36; social scientists, *N* = 31; scientists, *N* = 24.

TABLE 13. Examples of how academics write book reviews.

'I usually read completely the books I am reviewing (so as to be sure that I do not misunderstand them), marking parts that I think are particularly meaningful. Then I start by saying what the book is about and the intended audience (since having this information first may allow readers who are not interested to skip the rest of the review, and readers who are interested to raise their attention). Next I outline how the topic is developed, as concerns facets of content and depth of treatment. Then I point out what are in my opinion the points of strengths and weaknesses of the book. Finally, I try to give a global evaluation of my appreciation and possible usefulness of the book. Finally I polish the form and try to bring it to the required length. This writing phase lasts usually around two hours'.

'I read the book through, marking on it possible points for inclusion on (i) what the author says the book is about, (ii) possible key findings, and (iii) controversial statements. I then decide on which of these to include and which bits of the book to write about and what to leave out (because of space limitations). I word-process the first draft, which is usually too long, and then I cut it and continually refine it through numerous editings-with periods for incubation between each one—until it emerges, in my view, as a highly polished piece of prose!'

respondents commented that the nature of the journal in question, and the number of words allowed, also affected how they approached the task of book reviewing.

The quotations provided in Table 13 illustrate the kinds of responses obtained from authors who reported that they took roughly the same approach to reviewing different books. It can be seen that the first one concentrates more on the structure and content of the review, and the second one more on the writing of it.

Discussion

The main findings of this inquiry suggest that there is considerable agreement between what readers and writers of book reviews think of value in book reviews. Indeed, the main results are remarkably in line with the points made by Miranda (1996) and Stowe (1991) cited in the Introduction. There seem to be few differences between the opinions of these academics in the different disciplines. One or two features do stand out in that the requirements of the scientists are a bit different (such as their need for clear tables and figures) and there is a slight indication, in Table 9, that the reviewers in the arts and the social sciences seemed more

involved in the nature of the contribution than did the reviewers in the sciences. Finally, there is one apparent discrepancy between the respondents' opinions and actual practice. Few book reviews currently contain academic references (except perhaps, as noted earlier, in the arts), whereas many of these respondents thought that this would enhance the quality of reviews in all three disciplines.

Before accepting the validity of these conclusions, however, it is first necessary to make a few remarks on the procedures that were used in this inquiry. First, one of the referees for this article suggested that maybe I had used an insufficient number of respondents in developing the questionnaire. My response to this is that I used a standard procedure similar to that used in the development of programmed instruction in the 1960s. Gilbert (1960), for example, wrote "After 10 tries you will have a program that teaches 98% of the students" (p. 480). Recently, the number of people to employ in the developmental stages of producing instructional materials has resurfaced in debates on testing for "usability." As can be seen from the titles of current articles in this area, the older notion that five were sufficient (following Nielsen (1989) is being queried (e.g., see Barnum, 2002/2003; Faulkner, 2003; Virzi, 1992). So maybe the referee has a point. All that I can say here, however, is that by the time I got to the eleventh respondent in the pilot trials little more, if anything, was being added to the questionnaire.

Next, it is necessary to make a few remarks on the samples used in this inquiry. As noted above, the participants were obtained largely by sending out requests for help to assorted mailing groups. Unfortunately with this method one has no real way of knowing what the response rate will be and thus how representative the results will be. Undoubtedly in this study the response rates were very low (sometimes of the order of 2–5% as far as one can tell) and perhaps are rather small for a study of this nature.

Furthermore, the nature of these samples varied. In the social science group, for example, the majority of respondents were the authors of book reviews and referees for articles for the *British Journal of Educational Technology*. This, in part, probably explains why the social scientist in this study had written more reviews (on average) than had the authors in the other two groups. Nonetheless, it is of interest that when the percentage responses are compared to find that

these are very similar across all three groups. This suggests that although there were more reviewers in the social science group, this did not mean that they held different views from those in the other groups.

Finally, we should note here that there were several respondents who had not written any reviews in the Social Science and the Science groups. By and large it emerged that these contributors were less experienced academically than their colleagues who had written book reviews (as found in other studies, e.g., see McGrath et al., 2005). This suggests, however, that some of the data reported for the social science and the science groups in the first part of the questionnaire—on reading book reviews—might underestimate the findings compared with those obtained for the arts group. Less-experienced academics, for example, might be less likely to order or to purchase books for their institutions.

Despite these difficulties the findings reported above tie in with the previous results reported in the Introduction, although some qualify them. Thus, the proportion of respondents reading book reviews was much the same in the present study as that reported by Spink et al. (1998). The modal results on the usefulness of book reviews for teaching and research, however, were slightly different. Thus, in the present study, all three groups rated books reviews as slightly more useful for research compared with teaching, while the respondents in the sample employed by Spink et al. did the reverse: They rated reviews as equal in value if not slightly more useful for their teaching than for their research. Spink et al. had larger samples than those used in the present study ($N = 186$ scientists and technologists) but they combined academics in the arts and social sciences to form another group ($N = 133$), and their total sample contained 3 times as many men as women.

The data presented here about what readers look for and writers try to include in book reviews do not differ markedly from the advice on how to write effective book reviews given on the Web and in books and scholarly journals. Nonetheless, they are somewhat disappointing in that they do not provide much useful information about how colleagues actually go about writing book reviews. Unfortunately the particular question asked on this topic was somewhat ambiguous (it did not clarify between structure and method of writing). Furthermore, it only asked for the respondents to provide details of how they went about book reviewing if they wished. Perhaps I should have asked more forcefully for a paragraph from each of them on this item rather than suggesting it would be nice if they could provide it. In future work, different kinds of analyses of the written texts could be usefully employed to expand on the quantitative summaries provided here. The analyses I have in mind here include content analysis (Bilhatz, 1984), qualitative judgments (Hyland, 2000), computer-based stylistics (Hartley, Pennebaker, & Fox, 2003) and protocol analyses of authors writing reviews (Bainbridge & Sanderson, 2005; Lyle, 2003).

Nonetheless, as shown in Table 10, the data are consistent with the views of Motta-Roth (1998) and Nicolaisen (2002c) who suggest that there are key elements in book

reviews, irrespective of their discipline. If there are such elements, as Table 10 suggests, then this has implications for how reviews might be written better (by not leaving any key element out) and for giving instruction to novices (by indicating what readers and writers think it important to include).

Taken to extremes, the findings presented here give some support for the notion of structured book reviews that are prevalent in some medical journals (e.g., *Annals of Internal Medicine*; see Goldmann, 1997, 1999; Naiman, 1995). Here book reviews are written under subheadings, much like structured abstracts in many medical research journal articles. (Readers can find an example of structured book reviews in *Annals*, where the subheadings typically used are *Field*; *Format*; *Audience*; *Purpose*; *Content*; *Highlights*; *Limitations*; *Context*; and (sometimes) *Related Reading*.) Table 14 contains a copy of a structured book review written by the present author in the field of social science. The electronic template used by the *International Journal of Commerce and Management* is somewhat similar in nature in that it forces reviewers to follow a particular structure. Unfortunately, this is largely the chapter-by-chapter structure that was not evaluated strongly by most of the respondents in this study.

One of the main differences between a structured abstract and a structured book review is that the sequence of subelements in a structured abstract is fixed, whereas in a structured book review it can be more flexible (Hartley, 2004b). Fixed structures are easy to access, which is one of the virtues of structured abstracts when reading several of them all at once, whereas variable structures are less successful in this respect. Critics of structured book reviews also argue that such reviews are informative but dull (e.g., Wessely, 2000; Weisse, 2001). Indeed, it is hard to imagine a structured book review starting off with many of the sentences listed in Table 1.

Conclusions

The data provided in this report suggest that readers and writers of book reviews across the disciplines do have clear opinions about what should be included, and what a good book review should contain. Most of these items are in line with the recommendations and advice given by previous authors, although more emphasis has been given to the importance of including academic references in book reviews than heretofore. Because there has been so much agreement I have felt it possible to list the main suggestions in Table 15 in the form of a potential checklist for book reviewers that might help them to do a better task. Editors might like to provide such a checklist with their instructions for authors with, perhaps, some additional items specifically tailored to their own particular journals.

Finally, despite the example of the lone editor cited above, most book reviewing is big business. Many journals receive and publish hundreds of reviews over time. *Contemporary Sociology*, *H-NET Reviews*, *The Journal of American History*, *Political Studies*, and *PsycCRITQUES* all publish

TABLE 14. An example of structured book review written by the present author.

Diaz, Karen & O'Hanlon, N. (2004). *IssueWeb: A Guide and Sourcebook for Researching Controversial Issues on the Web*. Westport, Connecticut: Libraries Unlimited. ISBN 1-58158-078-1, pp. 290. Soft cover. \$30.00

Background: Students use the Web all the time to find information for their essays and their projects. Unfortunately there is a lot of biased information on the Web so we need to ensure that students know how to evaluate the content that they find. This book is helpful in this respect.

Audience: High-school and university students.

Purpose: To provide students with a guide and a sourcebook for using Web sites to gain information when researching controversial issues.

Structure and content: The book starts with the guide. This entails a brief Introduction that explains the rationale and structure of the book, and three short chapters labelled Finding, Evaluating, and Incorporating Your Resources. Students are taught to discriminate between sites ending in .org, .com, and .edu. The sourcebook then follows. This is a compendium of 40 'briefs' on controversial issues that students might like to research (e.g., abortion, adoption, animal rights, assisted-suicide, censorship, church and state, and civil liberties, to give the first few). Finally, three appendices list further Web resources for extending research.

The guide is good. In a sense it is the most important part of the book but it is so short that students might overlook it when diving into the 'issues'. The bulk of the book is taken up with these. Each brief includes (i) a two-page account providing background information on the topic, (ii) an outline of key controversies, (iii) suggested key words for use in search engines and other databases, and (iv) a list of relevant Web sites and their addresses grouped into five categories, namely: 'reference sites', 'news sites', 'legal sites', 'data sites' and 'advocacy sites'. The 'advocacy sites' provide Web addresses for people/groups/institutions, etc., that oppose or support various positions on the issue in question.

Strengths and weaknesses: The highlight of this book is the sourcebook. The briefs are cogently written, balanced and informative. Doubtless they will be duly plagiarised. But they do lead the reader to contrasting information that demands evaluation. One way to test the success of the book is to try it. Taking 'abortion' as the first issue, I looked up the 19 Web sites listed. I was able to locate all of them. Mind you, I then had the problem of knowing how to navigate the sites, what to select from the massive amounts of information presented, and how to use it. So students will need to return to the guidelines when examining Web sites. And they will need extra guidance on how to write up their researches for this latter issue is not really addressed in this text. *IssueWeb* starts the process for students but a whole lot more needs to be done to ensure that good reports get written.

Conclusions: This is a thought-provoking text that students will enjoy worldwide, even though it is unashamedly American, and some topics that different readers might like to see are not included. Reading through all of the briefs is instructive. Students will see that there are many different viewpoints on each issue raised, and they will be encouraged to evaluate them. The authors are to be congratulated on writing lucidly about forty issues that concern us all. More work will have to be done, however, to ensure that students write as informatively as the authors.

Related reading: Fabos, B. (2004). *Wrong Turn on the Information Superhighway: Education and the Commercialization of the Internet*. New York: Teachers College Press. The second half of this more detailed text looks at how teachers and students work with the Internet

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TABLE 15. A possible checklist for book reviewers.

Checklist

Make sure that your review contains:

- An early paragraph saying what the book is about and putting it in context
- Information about the intended audiences, and how well the book meets their needs
- A critique of the argument/content of the book
- Any supporting academic references
- Remarks on the strengths and limitations of the book
- A note (if appropriate) on how well the text is supported by tables/diagrams/illustrations
- A note on the format, length and price (or value for money)

If the following details are not supplied for you, please make sure that your review contains:

- Accurate details of the authors'/editors' names and initials
- Title of the publication
- Edition
- Date of publication
- Publisher and place of publication
- ISBN number
- Format (hardback, paperback or soft cover)
- Number of pages
- Price

over 500 reviews a year. And these published reviews represent perhaps only one third of the books submitted to these journals for review. Today, as noted in the Introduction, more and more journals are putting their book reviews on the Web as well as, or in addition, to their printed versions (e.g., see Barker, 1997; Dunleavy & Kelly, 2003; McGrath et al., 2005; Tomlins, 1996). The online Book Review Index of *Social SciSearch* database (Thomson ISI, Philadelphia, PA) contains references to more than 4,000,000 reviews of approximately 2,000,000 separate book and periodical titles. Online reviews can be published quickly and need not be constrained in terms of length.

In the days of printed texts, as Lindholm-Romantschuk (1998) pointed out, book review editors and their reviewers exerted considerable influence over who read what, where, and when. Perhaps this influence is waning in today's electronic world simply because so much is now available?

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