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The Reviewer's Craft

Judith Latham

What makes a good book review? What makes lively reading? And why do some reviews flop? How can a reviewer craft a review to capture the essence of a book and at the same time hold the reader's interest? Every prospective reviewer has posed, or should pose, such questions

The Preliminaries: Your Audience and Purpose

The cardinal rule is to focus first on the *audience* Imagine a real person who will be reading your review For example, at this moment I'm trying to visualize a reader who is a prospective book reviewer for *The Journal of Agricultural Economics Research* What would you, the reviewer, most want to know? What guidelines would help you most as you plan your review, or even before you read the book you intend to review? What should you do, and what should you not do? What questions should you ask yourself?

Who are your readers? Most, but not all, are knowledgeable in agricultural economics They have a strong technical background, but they may not be well informed in the specific area addressed by the book you are reviewing Some people may only scan the Journal's technical articles, but carefully read the book review section for intellectual stimulation or enjoyment

What do your readers want to know? They may have already decided from the title of the book and the author whether or not the subject is intrinsically appealing or relevant to their professional interests Some readers may want to keep abreast of new information in their field If so, reading the book—not the review—is the best way to add to their storehouse of facts Others may want to know what is being published outside their technical specialty, and they can learn what they want to know from your review without reading the book A few readers will want your judicious appraisal of whether they should read the book Is it a landmark study? Is it so well researched or so enticingly presented that people should examine it, even if its scope is outside their usual area of interest or expertise? Will the author's slant on the subject enlarge or alter their way of looking at some aspect of economics or of the world itself?

After you have conjured up an audience and imagined yourself in your readers' shoes, it is time to focus on the next issue, your *purpose* in writing the review My purpose here, for example, is to help you write better reviews To that end, I have highlighted some of the discoveries I made while perusing the book reviews published in the Journal since its first issue Afterwards, I have listed some ways to help you organize your ideas so your reviews will be easier to write and more enjoyable to read

What's *your* purpose in reviewing the book? Think of yourself as a broker between the author and the prospective reader You have a responsibility to discern the nature of the author's major contributions to economics research and to evaluate how well those contributions are communicated Is your objective to alert the reader to a new research method the author has developed? Do you want to convey information about an area of economics in which little has been published? Does the author present research findings that merit the attention of all agricultural economists or only of specialists? Is the book related to a current topic of public debate? Does it offer new and workable solutions?

To answer these questions, take notes while you read It helps to include comments and criticisms on (1) the value of the book and the information it imparts, especially how it compares with other books in the same field, (2) unusual insights or contributions by the author, (3) specific quarrels and quibbles, such as inaccuracies that trip up the author's argument, and (4) an evaluation of the book's best and worst features

Courtship of the Reader

You need to court the reader The trick is to start with a hook that will capture the reader's attention I recommend choosing a title for your review that differs from the title of the book, one that will specifically reflect

Latham is coeditor of *The Journal of Agricultural Economics Research* and the coordinator of the writing workshops of USDA's economics agencies She thanks Harold Breimyer, Ronald Mighell, and Clark Edwards for their helpful comments

your point of view as reviewer Check the book review sections of major newspapers to glean ideas for your own review titles

Good reviewers know that the *lead sentence* is critical It should immediately involve the reader in the reviewer's intellectual viewpoint by capturing what is new, unusual, provocative, or even seriously flawed about the book What responsive chord did the book strike in you? What ideas did it stimulate, or what vital questions did it leave unanswered?

To make your lead sentence dynamic, choose active verb constructions (subject, verb, object) rather than linking or passive ones An intriguing discovery I made in examining the Journal's reviews was that not only were strong leads essential in stimulating a desire to read the entire review but that, if the lead was weak, the review rarely got better The high correlation between a captivating lead and a perceptive review was astonishing

The following examples of Journal leads command the reader's attention

- To someone suckled on Friday night horse operas and weaned on Saturday afternoon double features, the West is a peculiarly American place The good guys may not have always won out there beyond the Platte and the Missouri, but they always had flair, and for better or worse, they were what the country was all about (Brewster, Vol 23, No 4, Oct 1971)

- In describing that animal called the political economy of agriculture, all men are blind But some men are far more accurate than are others in describing the beast (Tweeten, Vol 32, No 3, July 1980)

- A question to be asked about the content of any scientific discipline at any time is What part is temporal, and what part is perennial? (Breimyer, Vol 33, No 2, Apr 1981)

Never begin the first sentence of the first paragraph of your review (or preferably any sentence in your review) "This book discusses " The opening is ordinary and fails to engage the reader

Do not begin with an explanation of how a book is organized Such a technique is elementary, lazy, insignificant (except perhaps to teachers who are thinking in terms of a textbook syllabus), and boring It is a sure yawner Whenever possible, avoid mentioning numbers of chapters or sections followed by lengthy catalogs of their contents Readers generally do not care, and can rarely remember that part 3 or chapter 7 contains information on x, y, or z topics

It sometimes works to introduce a paragraph by posing a question—for example, "What are the uses of models, and who are the clients?" (Miller, Vol 34, No 2 Apr 1982) or "Why then haven't the nations of the Atlantic Community been willing to modify agricultural policies toward a less protectionistic, free trade situation?" (Abel, Vol 19, No 2, Apr 1967) Because the author of the book had not answered this question, the reviewer attempted to do so It is entirely appropriate for the reviewer to step outside the book and offer a professional opinion

Characteristics of Good and Bad Reviews

Helpful book reviews have several characteristics in common First, they highlight the book's strengths and weaknesses, that is, what's valuable and what isn't What is the book's major contribution to the discipline of economics? Which is more valuable, the overview or the specific information? Are any major lessons to be learned? What will you remember about the book? What would you, the book reviewer, like to emblazon on your reader's memory? Does the book do what the author set out to do? Is it carefully reasoned? How might it have been improved? What are its shortcomings or its questionable conclusions? Is the title misleading? Are the data questionable? Does the author have a personal agenda? Does the author rely on a personal account (as in a case study), on primary source material, or on secondary sources? Does the book cover the same terrain as other books in the field? If so, does it do a better job? Is it factual or interpretive?

Second, a helpful review tells what categories of readers will find the book most useful Readers want to know whether reading the whole book is worth the investment of their time If not, which portions are most worthwhile, and for whom? Does the reader need to read the entire book in sequence, or can the reader scan, focusing on a few illuminating sections? Because time is always short, a reviewer can add value by steering readers clear of nonessential material Is the book too long for its scope? Does it ramble? Is it disorganized and inchoate, or is it clear and persuasive? Is the book linear and historical, or is it problematic?

Third, a helpful review tells who needs to read the book How are most readers likely to use the book? What will specific types of readers—professional economists, graduate students, farmers, consumers, agribusiness people, government policymakers, or political scientists—get

out of it? Which sections will each of them find most illuminating or most tedious?

Fourth, the review suggests how the book differs from others on the same subject How is it better or worse? If you are familiar with the literature (and you should not be reviewing the book unless you are), you need not fear predicting the effect it will have on your professional colleagues For example, Cavin says of a book he reviewed

> Although aware of the hazards of economic forecasting, I venture to predict that [it] will prove to be a landmark in the teaching of economics, particularly in those schools where proper emphasis is given to economic history (Vol 20, No 1, Jan 1968)

Fifth, a review is a critique, not a book report or synopsis It should not chronicle each topic It should not be a substitute for reading the book, the way some students who are pressed for time may be tempted to use the college outline series for *Moby Dick* Organize your review around the major ideas in the book—in order of their importance to you, the reviewer, and their likely importance to the reader, rather than around each of the topics in the sequence the author has presented them Provide the reader with the substance of the book, but do not recap it chapter by chapter Avoid succumbing to the temptation of taking the easy way out "Smith's book is divided into four parts," followed by the titles of parts 1, 2, 3, and 4 plus a sentence or two about each Offer the reader more than an embroidered table of contents

Sixth, if the author has a thesis, tell what it is and whether you agree or disagree Is the thesis valid? How clearly does the author present it? How well is it defended? What does it ignore? What hypotheses does the author test?

Seventh, do not hedge in your evaluation, for example "The book does not appear to be satisfactory as a text " Have the courage of your convictions and state them in a straightforward manner Likewise, if you say, "In this reviewer's judgment, " you will undercut your point Don't excuse your judgment as mere personal opinion

It is much easier to review a book you love or hate than one about which you are lukewarm However, if you are reviewing a mediocre book, you owe it to your readers to alert them Here's an example where the reviewer's evaluation of a collection of essays was mixed

> The trick is not just to analyze, but to inject imagination and empathy into the analysis and then communicate the results to the rest of humanity
>
> If [the authors] had somehow managed to present their findings in a more satisfactory fashion, they would have turned an acceptable book into an outstanding one (Brewster, Vol 23, No 4, Oct 1971)

Perhaps the book you are reviewing is about a new area in econometrics, one in which the literature is sparse, but the author was hazy, pompous, or tedious Or perhaps the book is so poorly organized, tiresome, or forbidding that the reader may feel as if in one of those mazes that psychologists use to drive rats crazy Or, perhaps in an otherwise ordinary book, one chapter is so illuminating that some readers will want to borrow a library copy, but not buy the book These types of criticisms help the reader

Special Situations

Proceedings or edited volumes of readings pose special problems They can be the toughest category of book to review They can also be the hardest to read Reviewers are often tempted to mention each chapter or lecture by name, briefly summarizing the topics presented in each A review that is little more than an annotated table of contents is an olympic bore Furthermore, the reader cannot possibly assimilate all this disparate information, and will never be able to recall it upon finishing the review Therefore, it is better to use a separate box to give the authors and titles, if important (See Hiemstra, Vol 39, No 1, Winter 1987) Then you can concentrate on two or three particularly illuminating, or even controversial, sections Ask yourself What is the theme running through the readings? If, for example, you attended the conference where the set of papers was presented, you might begin with some personal reminiscences

Reasons that collected works are frequently so difficult to review is that they may be flawed by faulty organization, unclear intent, or excessive length If so, say so As Breimyer writes in his highly critical, but superb, review of a back-to back assembly of essays on farm policy "Collation without critique is a service of uncertain worth" (Vol 12, No 3, July 1960)

Biographies, on the other hand, often afford the opportunity for memorable reviews A reminiscence by a friend, colleague, or student, such as we find in Wilson's review of the biography of one of his former professors, lends a personal touch and an immediacy that engage the reader (Vol 1, No 2, Apr 1949, p 66) Biographies also speak to the central issue of all relevant writing So what? When Sherman reviews Harrod's biography of John Maynard Keynes, she poses the question that

many of us have asked "What was the touchstone of [his] great success?" (Vol 3, No 3, July 1951) And then she uses the review to answer it

Matters of Style

At some point, you must direct your attention to the craft of writing—namely, communication (how to use words to express your ideas most clearly) and persuasion (how to enchant your readers sufficiently that they too will see the value of those ideas) The good news is that with discipline this craft can be learned, even by reviewers whose literary gifts are modest I recommend that, before you write your next book review, you read both McCloskey's book, *The Writing of Economics* (1987), and Colvin and Mighell's article, "Writing as a Tool for Economic Research"

> The very nature of economics places an ethical obligation on economists to use the resources of communication more efficiently than others (Colvin and Mighell, Vol 9, No 4, Oct 1957)

Colvin and Mighell offer invaluable tips on writing, including sentence structure, grammar, style, tone, organization, consistency, words to use and not to use, and techniques for editing one's own writing

Aim for simplicity and clarity, not pedantry Writers with solid professional reputations rarely try to impress their readers with their sophistication They do not need to drag in arcane detail to establish their credentials If an economist has presented concepts the nonspecialist may find difficult to comprehend, the reviewer has an obligation to make those ideas comprehensible to all readers of the journal in which the review will appear As Alport said in the lead to his critical review of *The Language of Social Research* "If this be the language of social research then teach me, please, a simpler tongue" (Alport, Vol 8, No 2, Apr 1956)

Use the language of ordinary speech Sundquist criticizes writers of economics for writing "at a level above which many upperclassmen and some graduate students [are] able to comprehend" (Sundquist, Vol 23, No 3, July 1971) Therefore, reviewers of books on economics need to establish a natural, not an academic, tone For example, it is far more straightforward either to say "I think" than "in the opinion of this reviewer" or to simply state the point outright without qualification or apology

It is generally better in a review to use the author's last name than any of the following Professor Galbraith, Dr Galbraith, the author, the book, the volume It is far stronger to tell the reader "Galbraith believes " than "In the opinion of the author of the book, " Be direct, make the person come alive Don't try to separate ideas from the individuals who espouse them Employ active voice constructions, which are more natural and direct, like human speech A passive sentence, such as "the estimation problem is treated systematically by applying the criterion of maximum likelihood," has several problems (Vol 3, No 3, p 105) it does not tell you who is applying the criterion, it is ungrammatical because of the dangling modifier "by applying", it is stilted and unnatural

Use short, simple sentences rather than long, convoluted ones Mini sentences work well for variation and emphasis They grab the attention of the reader For example

> no misunderstanding so impedes farm policy studies as the premise that the problem is singular *It is not It is plural* The farm problem is a price problem, and an income problem, and an excess manpower problem, and a market problem (Breimyer, Vol 17, No 1, Jan 65)

Avoid hackneyed terms As Mighell and Lane tell us in their article on "Writing and the Economic Researcher "

> Economists sometimes overwork certain words The shock value of using such a word on special occasions is largely lost if it is used all the time (Mighell, Vol 25, No 1, Jan 1973)

Words like "impact," "concern," "aggregate," "methodology," "utilization," and "maximization" are just the kind of economic jargon that reviewers need to beware of

Use superlatives, adjectives, and adverbs sparingly As Mighell and Lane point out "If you overstress every point, your reader will pay no attention when you have something that really deserves stress" (Mighell and Lane, Vol 25, No 1, Jan 1973) When describing a book, limit the use of the following tired, weak, and overused adjectives interesting, important, excellent, worthwhile, valuable, well-written, and uninteresting You might instead try these lucid, dynamic, powerful, dramatic, engaging, provocative, readable, rich in insights, pragmatic, balanced, misleading, or forbidding

Pay special attention to your use of the demonstrative pronoun and adjective "this," as in "this book," "this idea," or simply (and often mysteriously) "this " Probably no other word in economics writing is so abused Likewise, eliminate the most trite of all adverbs, "very "

Furthermore, don't introduce sentences with adverbs like hopefully, interestingly, surprisingly, and regretfully It's far better to say "I hope," "I found fascinating," or "I was disappointed " Own your reactions to the book you are reviewing without raising them to a universal level

Have the courage of your convictions Reviewers have the right and duty to assume professional responsibility for their own judgments

> A special problem for economists in discussions of future events is the tendency to overqualify The future is uncertain No one wishes to be caught out on a limb that may break But it is better to state your assumptions and make forthright statements than to hedge and lose all meaning (Mighell and Lane, Vol 25, No 1, Jan 1973)

Refrain from ending your review with the hackneyed phrase, "in summary," or the stilted comment, "as has been pointed out "

Avoid bibliographies at the end of book reviews because they are pretentious Try to work the ideas of other authors you examine, quote, or paraphrase into the body of your review You may occasionally need to use footnotes, but in a review it's best to keep them to a minimum If you parade your own encyclopedic knowledge of the subject, you are likely to annoy the reader

The Last Word

Just as reviewers should begin by focusing on their audience, they should end with the same focus

Let's imagine for a moment a poor, but not atypical, review—namely, the kind you will want to avoid It might be written in the following manner

> This is an important and interesting book
> The author's thesis is that The author divides the subject into three parts, each with five chapters Chapter 1 explains Chapter 15 discusses As has been pointed out, the author maintains that In the opinion of this reviewer, the book has several strong points
> In summary, economists who work in the area of should read this book

Frankly, I believe few readers will make it to the end of such a review because their imaginations are not kindled and their professional needs are not met A good review, in contrast, starts by suggesting what sets the book apart from the ordinary one and how the reader will benefit The reviewer's last word should underscore the book's enduring value For example

> No concrete solutions are offered to the problems of economics in Ward's book The emphasis is on what we as economists ought not to do But, as he indicates, the first step in correcting any error is recognizing that the error does exist For this I think Ward can be commended We do need reminding (Kost, Vol 25, No 1, Jan 1973)

> Many readers go through books such as this one seeking inspiration to formulate variations of their own to tackle immediate problems of their own requiring application of advanced optimization techniques in quantitative economics models If you are one of those readers, I recommend this book to you as a source of insights into variations of conventional textbook treatments (Edwards, Vol 22, No 4, Oct 1970)

If the next time you write a book review you examine the questions posed here and reflect on the ideas suggested, you will find the craft of reviewing easier And I think your readers will find your review both livelier and more informative