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# EVALUATING THE BOOK AS A WHOLE: THE BOOK REVIEW

**A** book review tells not only what is in a book but also what a book attempts to achieve and how it can be used. To discuss the uses of a book, you must explore your own reactions, for these reactions reveal how you have responded to the book. Thus, in writing a review, you combine the skills of describing what is on the page, analyzing how the book tries to achieve its purpose, and expressing your own reactions. The nature and length of the review depend on the book, the purpose of the review, and the anticipated audience. The shorter the review, the more succinctly you must present your judgments. By writing reviews, you will develop your critical skills as a reader and researcher, and you will be mastering evaluative writing, which you will find useful in many situations beyond the book review itself.

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## Books as Tools

Books are tools for communication between two minds. Through the words and pictures of a text, the writer wants to do something to or for the reader. The reader is or is not affected by the text, sometimes in the way the writer wanted and sometimes in a different way. A book reviewer, by sharing his or her reactions to a book, can let you know whether that book worked as a communication tool between the author and that one reader. The reviewer can tell you not just what the book says, but what the book did to him or her. Thus a book review's evaluation is both an objective matter of what the book presents and a subjective matter of what the book does to the reader.

This text has thus far kept methods of developing your subjective responses separate from methods of gaining objective knowledge of a text. Marginal annotations, journals, and the argumentative essay have encouraged you to look into yourself for personal reactions, which you have then developed. On the other hand, paraphrase, summary, and analyses of voices and purpose have sharpened your ability to see exactly what appears on the page—outside yourself. Actually, the division of labor isn't that simple. The more deeply you understand what is on the page, the more you will react. Conversely, the more engaged you are in a subject, the more you will want to understand what others have written. An animated conversation is a two-way affair.

In the evaluative book review, these two streams—an accurate reading and a strong response—come together, for the reviewer should indicate what is in the book and what the contents might mean to a reader. The reviewer's own reaction reveals to the book buyer the potential of what may be gained from reading it. If the reviewer does not go beyond a summary of the original, this dull restatement gives the reader no clear direction to follow. If, however, the reviewer indicates the kind of communication that passed between two minds via the primed page, the reader can decide whether the book offers the kind of mental interaction he or she wants.

Writing a book review helps you read a book carefully, understand it better, and think about what the book means to you. Writing a book review as part of the work of a college course provides you with the opportunity to interact deeply with a writer's extended statement and to relate it to the subject matter of the course.

Although you may never write formal book reviews after you leave college, in most professions and careers you must evaluate documents, whether business reports, project proposals, legal briefs, reorganization plans, or annual reports. You also have to write evaluative reports about personnel, projects, or products; evaluative reports are not unlike book reviews.

### What a Book Review Does

The way a review represents what a book does, evaluates how well the book does it, and responds to the challenge the book presents is best illustrated by a strong review written in reaction to a strong book. Randy Shilts's book on the AIDS epidemic, *And the Band Played On*, came out at the height of public controversy over how well the U.S. government and others responded to this medical crisis. Shilts's book, a detailed critical history of such response, was widely reviewed both for the general public and for many specialized audiences concerned with the AIDS crisis. The medical community, of course, has been deeply involved in responding to AIDS, and the following review appeared in the *New England Journal of Medicine*, one of the foremost medical journals in the United States. Notice how the reviewers, a lawyer and a physician, in describing the contents evaluate the thoroughness and credibility of the book. They first identify what Shilts has and has not done; then, midway in the review, they turn to the

challenges the book presents to the reader and to society. In addressing these challenges, the reviewers make known their own concerns and tell how the book has focused and strengthened those concerns.

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The review's evaluation of the historical accuracy and completeness of Shilts's research lets us know to what extent the reviewers accept Shilts's account and to what extent they accept other views. Although they have some reservations, Gleason and Grady take Shilts's account very seriously. In discussing Shilts's own involvement in the gay community and the events discussed in the book, the reviewers help identify the concerns the book is addressing and the kinds of arguments its author is trying to make. And in examining how the AIDS Story continues, the reviewers make clear how the story related in the book should influence our own decisions about the future. Both the book and the review bring together scholarship, the personal concerns of the writers, major issues of public concern, and policy choices. By asking what the book does and how well it is done, the review then poses the question of what we as individuals and as a society ought to do now. After reading the review, we not only know the outline of Shilts's historical account, we also know that the reviewers believe we ought to pay serious attention to what he has written.

### Reviews as Evaluations

The most common type of review helps us decide whether or not to buy a book, watch a movie or television show, or purchase a product. Such reviews help us evaluate what we ought to pay attention to, spend time and energy on, pay money for. Some reviews do not pass judgment directly, but simply give information upon which we can base our own decisions. Yet often reviewers share their evaluations with us: what the thing being reviewed did to or for them. But in all cases, though, the review is aimed at assigning value; that is, at *evaluation*.

In our consumerist society where we must make many decisions about how to spend time and money, we are surrounded by evaluative reviews. Computer magazines contain reviews of the latest software; auto magazines review the latest cars. *Consumer Reports* regularly reviews a wide range of products, from cosmetics to air conditioners. Before selecting your college, perhaps you looked through one of the many books giving evaluative reports on institutions of higher education. Newspapers daily carry reviews of the latest movies and television shows. There are even magazines specializing in reviews of the latest entertainment, ranging from music to video games.

In each case the review evaluates or rates something in relation to the kind of thing it is. Television situation comedies are reviewed in terms of how much they make someone laugh or the kinds of satiric attitudes they express. Police dramas are ranked in terms of the excitement and suspense they generate. Soap operas are reviewed in terms of characters, plots, and emotional impact.

A book review, similarly, can identify the type of book being reviewed, how well it achieves what that kind of book is supposed to, and what you would experience or gain by reading it. A mystery thriller will be evaluated in terms of how well it engages the reader in the mystery and how many chills it raises. An advice book for college students is appropriately reviewed by indicating the kind of advice it offers and evaluating how useful the advice is likely to be. The following short review of Joshua Halberstam's *Acing College: A Professor Tells Students How to Beat the System* follows just such an evaluative strategy.

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In this review, evaluation is mixed with description through such words as *down-to-earth*, *entertaining*, *particularly valuable*, and *convincingly*. The closing line drives home why the book is good and who would profit from reading it.

### Reviews in College: A Different Kind of Evaluation

The reviews you will most likely be assigned to write in college carry out a different kind of evaluation. In most cases your reader, probably the instructor, will not be using the review to decide what to read. She or he will be looking instead for what value you found in the book and how carefully and critically you have read it. The instructor will note what importance you attach to the book's main ideas, what you thought of those ideas, and how you relate the book and your thoughts to the course.

In some courses, you may be assigned descriptive reports of books (or occasionally, documentary films) to determine whether you have read attentively and can restate what you learned. Far more frequently, though, you are asked in a college course to do serious reviewing—evaluating and reflecting on what you have just read. Thus it is important to go beyond the simple descriptive report with which you may start the review and enter into serious dialogue with the book, its credibility, meaning, and implications. The books you are asked to review will no doubt be related to your courses' subject matter, extending your knowledge through supplementary readings. Moreover, the method of evaluation and the kinds of ideas you develop in your response to what you read also need to be relevant to course material. Thus in a history course, where you are asked to make connections among various historical texts you have read, your review should consider how a particular book extends, enriches, contrasts with, or otherwise relates to other course material. For a sociology course which emphasizes evaluating the research methods that produce results, before interpreting the meaning of those results, your review should give serious attention to the research methods described in the book, then evaluate the results and interpret their meaning in light of the method. For a psychology course which applies to practical situations the theories you have learned, your review should address both theory and practical applications. Thus course-assigned reviews evaluate a book in terms of the ideas, topics, skills, practices, or other concerns of the specific course.

The kinds of reviews you write for college courses are similar to the kinds of reviews that frequently appear in academic journals, where books are evaluated for what they add to the knowledge of the field. The following review, published in *Social Science Quarterly*, identifies the book's detailed sociological description of the animal rights movement as its strong point. But the review finds weakness in ideas that add little to those of previous books and theories.

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### Reviews as Debates

The final judgment of the review of *The Animal Rights Crusade* is that the book opens a debate over animal rights disputes but does not yet engage in the debate. Often, however, scholarly reviewers go beyond objective evaluation to enter into lively discussion. They may directly follow up on the points made in a book and explore the broader implications, or they may argue against the stance the book takes, perhaps by turning the facts presented in the book against the

argument the author makes. This kind of discussion review is often assigned in college courses, to give students the opportunity to begin addressing important issues presented in course materials and publications in the field. Writing a review rather than just stating an opinion helps you become engaged in a serious and focused debate. The following pair of reviews of a book on the politics and policy of affirmative action in recent United States history find important truths in a book they evaluate as well-researched. However, the truths each reviewer finds are different and point toward opposite positions on affirmative action. Thus in evaluating *Equality Transformed: A Quarter Century of Affirmative Action* by Herman Belz, these reviewers not only carry on a debate with the book, but also participate in the larger continuing debate over affirmative action policies. The reviews first appeared in scholarly history journals, the *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* and the *Journal of American History*.

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This first review, by Harvey C. Mansfield, starts with a sentence identifying the subject of the book in a way that sets up the reviewer's argument. Mansfield is calling affirmative action a change from "race-blind to race-conscious measures." Mansfield then argues for the anti-affirmative action position that he shares with the author of the book. This argument, while making use of historical material from the book, is presented in abstract terms of legal philosophy. The reviewer next outlines the book's account of how the United States government moved away from the principles he approves to the policy he opposes. He uses the review as a vehicle to carry forward the policy argument he wishes to make.

Because the next reviewer, Tony Freyer, takes an opposite position, he makes a more complex use of the book. While defining the limits of the history the book presents, he at first praises the fullness of the account. While outlining the history of affirmative action presented in the book, Freyer postpones stating his own position. Not until the second half of the review, after he has described Belz's historical account and identified Belz's argument, does this reviewer raise the questions that lead to conclusions contradicting those of the book.

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By examining from an alternative position the issues raised by Belz, Freyer is able to reinterpret some of the facts offered in the book. He points out what parts of the story Belz has failed to tell and calls Belz's own conclusions into question. In the closing paragraph, Freyer redefines affirmative action in a new way, one suggesting that Belz has not seen the real issue. Even while arguing against the conclusions of the book, however, the reviewer praises it as the most serious history we have of affirmative action; in all future studies, he says, it must be taken into account.

The book review that enters into debate with the book grows out of the evaluative review. The debate helps identify the worth of the book to someone thinking through the issues being discussed. Reviews you are assigned to write in college courses are extensions of the conversations of the class, conversations among assigned readings, the students, and their instructors. Reviewing allows you to add your own comment to the statement of a book.

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## Writing a Book Review

In order for you as a reviewer to write the fullest and most considered response to a book, your reading and thinking must go through several stages. The more questions of interest the book poses, the more time you should devote to developing your ideas before actually writing the review. When first reading a book for meaning, pay special attention to its preface or foreword and to any other information that will give a clue to the book's overall purpose and *its* general context."As you reread the book, annotate it with comments on the author's technique and your own reactions. After having developed some thoughts through journal entries, look through the book one more time. Then clarify your thoughts by writing down answers to the following questions.

### Questions to Answer Before Writing a Book Review

- What seems to be the author's main purpose or point?
- Is this purpose aimed at any particular group of readers?
- What information or knowledge does the book convey?
- What personal or practical meaning does the book have for you?
- What are the most appropriate terms by which to evaluate the book?
- On the basis of the criteria you have just selected, how successful do you think the author was in carrying out the overall purposes of the book?

Once you know your reactions to what the book is and what it does, you are ready to outline and write the first draft of your review.

### The Shape of Your Review

Beyond a few items that must appear in a review, what you include and how you organize it is up to you. Many reviews, however, do follow one general pattern that includes all the important elements of a review.

The required items are all a matter of common sense. The reader must know what book you are talking about, so head the review with a *bibliographic* entry. It is helpful to include not just author, title, and publication information but also the number of pages and the price of the book, because readers like to know what commitment of time and money it takes to read the book. The ideal format of this entry is as follows:

*Title. Author. Place of publication: publisher, date of publication. Number of pages. Price.*

Sometimes, for the convenience of librarians, the International Standard Book Number (ISBN) or Library of Congress Catalog (LCC) number is listed. The first time you mention the book in the review, repeat the author and title so that the reader does not have to refer back to the bibliographic entry.

The body of the review must give a clear overview of the contents of the book, the special purpose for the audience of the book, and the reviewer's reaction and evaluation. Though reviews show a wide variety of form and organization, a typical opening is *a direct statement about the*

*kind of book being reviewed and its main topic*—followed by a few words of the reviewer's evaluations. If the book raises any special problem that the review will explore later, this may be briefly mentioned here. Thus, in the first few sentences, the reader learns where both the book and the review are headed.

The next paragraph or section often includes *background that helps place the book in context*, either by describing the general problem the book addresses or by mentioning earlier books by this or another author. Here is also an appropriate place for the reviewer to discuss criteria by which to judge the book, for the context helps define what the book attempts to do.

Next, a *summary of the main points of the book*—highlighted by paraphrase and quotation—gives an overview of the book's content. The reviewer's reactions may be included with the ongoing summary of the contents, or all evaluative comments may be saved for the end. Even if a personal reaction is withheld, the reviewer's manner of describing the contents often gives a clear impression of what he or she thinks. In any case, it is important to distinguish between the ideas of the author and those of the reviewer. Careful labeling (*Dorothy Nelkin continues ... ; This reviewer believes ...*) keeps the reviewer's ideas separate from the author's ideas. Confusion between the two weakens the value of the review to its reader.

In the final part of the review, the reviewer is free to carry on the *discussion in a variety of ways*, evaluating how well the book has achieved its goal, musing over the possibilities suggested by the book, arguing with specific points, discussing matters the book has left out, even exploring a personal experience related to the subject. No matter how far afield the comments stray, they usually return in the last few lines to a more *direct comment on the book* and tie together issues raised in the review. Although some trick endings are clichés, a final statement that leaves the reader with a sense of completion—with a musical cadence—lends a desirable grace to the review. That grace is important, for we should consider the evaluation of another person's work not as a cold measurement but as a civilized act of human society.

### A STUDENT EXAMPLE FOR DISCUSSION

In the following review Jess Hopkins, a college student pursuing environmental studies, considers the usefulness of the book *Earth in the Balance: Ecology and the Human Spirit*, in helping her understand and respond to environmental dilemmas confronting the global community in the late twentieth century. She finds that the book, by vice president Gore, raises important questions about current national and international environmental policies and challenges the ways American citizens think about their relationship to the earth. However, she is troubled by the book's emphasis on political solutions to these global environmental problems. Although Jess agrees with Gore's insistence on the urgency of the problem and the need to change ways of thinking in order to effect real change in the world, she still is uncertain about what the government-level solutions offered in the book mean for her own actions and long-term career goals.

Earth in the Balance: Ecology and the Human Spirit  
by Al Gore.  
Plume/Penguin Books, 407 pp., \$13.00.  
ISBN 0-452-26935-0  
Reviewed by Jess Hopkins

In his introduction to *Earth in the Balance: Ecology and the Human Spirit*, Vice President Albert Gore, Jr., describes the book as "part of a personal journey ... in search of a true understanding of the global ecological crisis and how it can be resolved" (1). This is a



personal journey on which Gore would like his readers to accompany him. The book does just that: it challenges us to change the way we see the world in order to change the world we see. Gore's assessment of the problem and insistence on the need to radically alter our ways of thinking about OUI relationship to the earth inspires action. However, his emphasis on the central role that governments must play in solving the earth's environmental problems made me wonder what I could do beyond voting, paying my taxes, and providing moral support for those responsible for putting the policies needed to effect real change into practice. *Earth in the Balance* has been praised as an inspirational call to spiritual renewal and political action and denounced as a piece of election year political propaganda. It has been applauded as a concise and plainly written description of the current state of the global environment and attacked as bad science and foolish idealism. Whatever it may be, it is neither political propaganda (the book was written before Gore was placed on the Democratic ticket) nor a scientific treatise. Gore's targeted audience is the average American citizen; while his political bias is moderate to liberal, he attempts to appeal to readers with assorted political leanings. His stated goal is to empower his readers to change their minds and their practices, but he also clearly intends to persuade them to see things his way and support his agenda for resolving global environmental issues.

Gore divides his book into three sections. The first two address the problem—what the threat to the global environment is and what has caused our blindness to it—and the third addresses Gore's ideas for solving this problem. In the first two sections Gore draws on a variety of disciplines—"the earth sciences, economics, sociology, history, information theory, psychology, philosophy, and religion" (269-270)—to explain the global ecological crisis, and in the third section he examines the potential for resolving it in the political arena.

In "Balance at Risk," the first section, Gore outlines the "strategic threats" to the global environment—from global warming to toxic pollution to overpopulation—in order to show the urgency of the need to "change our civilization and our way of thinking about the relationship between humankind and the earth" (163). The specific evidence Gore provides is a combination of anecdotes, analogies, first-hand experience, and scientific research. Although some of his projections for the future may be based on data open to alternative interpretations, the quantity and quality of this evidence makes his claim about the urgent need for change compelling. Even if we may have questions about the threat of global warming and the greenhouse effect, the accounts of the effects of the depletion of the rain forests and air and water pollution are convincing, and frightening.

In the second section, "The Search for Balance," Gore systematically and convincingly illustrates the failure of our current ways of thinking about the relationship between human civilization and the earth: emphasizing the positive elements of technology and ignoring the negative; neglecting long term hazards in order to achieve short term benefits; and viewing human beings as separate from and even superior to the environment they inhabit. These assumptions, Gore argues, have resulted in a spiritual imbalance in individuals and in society at large, and have contributed to the global ecological crisis we now face. He believes that in order to insure a healthy and productive future we need to shift from a philosophy of consumption to a philosophy of "stewardship" and "sustainable development." This new way of thinking, what Gore calls an "environmentalism of the spirit," is necessary for balancing the earth's ecological system—and begins with ordinary citizens like you and me. This section helped me put together many of the issues I had been thinking about and reconfirmed my commitment to environmental studies both as part of my own personal development and to help other people come to understand their relationship to the environment.

The final section, "Striking the Balance," however, confused me as to whether individuals like me really would play a significant role in coming to environmental solutions. In this section Gore shifts from the realm of the individual spirit to the realm of national and international politics and from the theoretical to the practical. Here he challenges the United States to provide leadership in implementing a "Global Marshall Plan." Although Gore acknowledges that this plan begins with individuals who dare to act, he focuses on the role governments—in particular the government of the United States—must play in implementing five "strategic goals" for saving the global environment: stabilizing world population; developing "environmentally appropriate" technologies; changing the way we measure growth, productivity, and progress; negotiating international treaties and



agreements; and establishing a plan for educating the global community about the environment (305-306). While these goals are admirable, they are, as Gore admits, presented from his vantage point as a politician. He places a great deal of faith in the ability of governments to take the lead in solving the problems outlined in the first two sections and he asks his readers to share that faith.

Although Gore's plea for dramatic changes in thought and action is compelling, it ultimately leaves me wondering whether what I can do as an individual ultimately will make a difference in the global environment. I know, as the cliché goes, every little bit helps. I know that recycling waste is the right thing to do. Still, in the face of global catastrophes like the destruction of rain forests and overpopulation, separating out my glass, aluminum, and paper from the rest of my garbage, and choosing to drink my coffee out of a paper cup instead of styrofoam sometimes seem insignificant.

I know that how I think about my relationship to the earth affects how I act: because of my convictions about the importance of preserving our environment I have chosen to pursue a career in environmental education. In this career I hope to contribute to the kinds of changes that Gore advocates in his book. But I worry that education will be slow to reach those in power. Given the urgency of the situation, and the irreversibility of some of the changes that the earth is now experiencing, I sometimes fear that it, may be too late.

Gore's book is inspiring, and even empowering, but only up to a point. Even as it inspires and empowers, it paints a bleak picture of the current imbalance in ourselves and in our environment and places responsibility for making the future better in the hands of those who have helped to paint the picture to begin with. Despite these shortcomings, Gore is to be commended for making the environment a central political issue and giving it the attention it deserves. Although I find it difficult to share his sense of optimism about the future, I share his concerns and admire his courage.

### Short Versus Long Reviews

The middle-length review of five hundred to a thousand words, which we have been considering, is the most common kind in newspapers and magazines. It allows the reviewer room to present contents and reactions with substantial supporting examples and discussion. In any fewer words, the reviewer must get right to the core of the book's argument and to his or her reaction. Without space for lengthy support or involved explanations, the short review must rely on straightforward statements; precisely phrased judgments can be backed with only a few well-chosen examples. When the book is found wanting, the reviewer can express distaste by making a blunt judgment or by taking an ironic attitude. The following capsule review from the *Los Angeles Times*, through some overview statements and a few very brief and pointed examples, lets you know exactly what kind of book is being discussed and makes clear that it lives up to the author's goals. At the same time, the reviewer, Kenneth Turan, raises questions about the value of just such a book by using an ironic tone,

This review both praises and damns in the same sentence. The opening quotation about the book's goals almost seems to raise questions about itself, making you wonder about people who would be interested in such details. Are you really such a reader?' The ironic attitude is built up by apparently positive comments, such as that the author is «determined» and that «there seems to be no reason to seriously doubt» the claims of the book. Every sentence has a straight-faced zinger, making you wonder who would take such trivia so seriously. The closing sentence caps the ironic judgment—given the foolishness of the first book, it is astonishing to think of a second volume.

**Another Capsule Review** A book worthy of serious consideration can be characterized well enough in a capsule review to give the reader a sense of its content and value. The following review from *Choice*, a book review journal for academic libraries, in a short space announces the

book's merits and impact, presents the main findings, and gives a sense of the range of evidence employed. Within about two hundred words, the reviewer has painted a substantial picture of a complex, detailed book and made a solid recommendation.

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Writing capsule reviews will develop your ability to react to and place a book. You will learn to get to the core of your reaction in a few words, for otherwise the review will be finished before you get to your evaluation. Learning to characterize books succinctly and to make pointed estimates of their value will enable you to find your way more easily among the variety of books available when you come to gather materials for your research paper. Even very short reviews—fifty or fewer words—will further sharpen your instincts about books and prepare you for placing books in relation to each other, a skill needed for preparing *a review of the literature* (see Chapter 10), as well as an *annotated bibliography* (see Chapter 11).

**The Full Review** At the other extreme, the long review allows full discussion of all aspects of a book and the reviewer's estimate of it. Not every book warrants detailed comment, but when the book raises interesting, complex questions or when the argument needs careful weighing, the long review permits all issues to be explored to their logical conclusion. To write an extended review that looks deeply into the issues of a book, the reviewer usually needs to have substantial knowledge of the subject, of the other books in the field, and of the previous work by the same author. The more deeply one looks into any book, the more important it is to understand how: the book fits into earlier “conversations.” One can find examples of fun reviews in many scholarly journals and in book review journals such as the *New York Review of Books*.

### **WRITING ASSIGNMENTS**

1. Select a book that you remember enjoying as a child. Reread it and write a 500-word review directed toward parents who are choosing books for their children. Then write a 150-word review directed toward children, explaining why they ought to read the book.
2. For your college newspaper, write a 300-word review of a book you have read recently that was useful, amusing, or thought provoking.
3. Write a 150-word review for your classmates about the worst book that you have read in the past few years. Make it clear why readers should stay away from this book.
4. Write a 500-word review of a book you are using for a research project for either this or another course. Direct the review to the teacher and your fellow students to let them know how valuable and reliable a source the book is.
5. Choose three books from a research project you have worked on or from an area of special interest for you. Write a short, 50-word review of each to let people who are just becoming interested in the area know what books are worth reading.
6. Choose a course you have taken that had several books on the required reading list. For each title assigned in the course, write a short, 50-word review to help your instructor decide whether to assign the same books in future semesters.

7. Write a 150-word review of a movie you have recently seen. Direct your review to your classmates and make clear why they should or should not see the film.
8. Find two reviews in your college library of a book you have read or a movie or television show you have seen. Write a 50-word summary of each, describing the nature of the evaluation and explaining which review you find more accurate or more helpful and why.
9. Write a review of Part 1 of this textbook to let the author know to what extent this book is useful to you and where it might be improved. Mail the review to: Charles Bazerman, c/o College Division, Houghton Mifflin Company, 222 Berkeley Street, Boston, MA 02116.