How to Write Book Reviews People Trust in Four Hundred Wor

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Turn margin notes into a four-hundred-word review with a one-line verdict, honest genre-based ratings, and no spoilers, using a thirty-minute draft and a ten-minute edit.

Things you will need

- A soft pencil for margin notes in owned copies
- Sticky tabs in two colors for library and review copies
- A pocket notebook or phone notes app for the quote bank
- A kitchen timer for the thirty-minute draft
- The book's front matter and colophon page for edition details
- A smartphone with a decent rear camera
- A plain cotton sheet or wooden board as photo backdrop
- A small stack of books to steady the phone above the cover
- A reusable review template with the fixed six headings
- A laptop or keyboard you can draft quickly on
- A spreadsheet for the review archive, or a notes app if simpler
- A dated folder for review photographs, local and backed up
- A printed or online style manual for names and quotations
- A cardigan-and-cold-coffee reading spot for the overnight reread of your own draft

Read with the Review in Mind

1. **Name the Reader Each Review Must Serve**
   Before you open the book, write one sentence naming the person your review is for: the parent weighing a middle-grade series, the thriller reader who hates romance subplots, the coworker who loved the author's first novel.
2. **Pencil Page Numbers and Reactions in the Margins**
   Annotate as you read, and keep it light: a page number plus one word — flat, funny, confusing, gorgeous — captures far more than memory does a week later.
3. **Harvest Your Quotes Before the Last Chapter**
   As soon as a sentence stops you, copy it into a quote bank with its page number; a phone notes app works as well as a paper notebook for this.
4. **Pick Books You Can Judge Against Their Genre**
   Review what you can evaluate fairly: if you never read fantasy, your three stars on a fantasy novel will measure your tolerance for magic systems rather than the book.
5. **Log One Honest Line per Reading Session**
   At the end of every sitting, record a single line: date, pages read, and your own energy from one to five.

Draft the Review in Thirty Minutes

6. **Open with a One-Line Verdict and Rating**
   Start the draft with the verdict, not the setup: one sentence that tells the named reader whether to

buy, borrow, skip, or argue.

7. **Say Who Will Love This and Who Will Not**

   Two sentences of who-it-is-for do more work than any amount of plot retelling, so make them concrete: if you liked the claustrophobic tension of thrillers set in one location, this is your book; if you need a protagonist you actively like, skip it.

8. **Summarize Only the Setup, Then Stop**

   Hold the summary to sixty to eighty words and stop at the moment the book's real question begins.

9. **Split the Body into Worked and Did Not Work**

   Make the middle of the review two labeled moves rather than a blur of impressions.

10. **Draft against a Timer, Then Sleep on It**

    Set a timer for thirty minutes and write the whole review straight through from your margin marks and quote bank without polishing; a first pass that takes longer usually means you are editing in your head instead of drafting.

Rate, Quote, and Handle Disappointment Honestly

11. **Quote One or Two Lines and Nothing More**

    A long quotation is not evidence; it is substitution.

12. **Rate Against the Genre, Not against Your Mood**

    Calibrate before you press the stars: a four means this book does what its genre promises well, not that you were feeling generous that afternoon.

13. **Cut Plot Summary until the Review Breathes**

    The most common failure in reader reviews is four paragraphs of retelling plus one vague it was good.

14. **Mark Spoilers before the Reveal, Not after**

    Assume that anything you say about a book under two years old will be read by people who are halfway through it.

15. **Critique the Craft, Never the Author's Identity**

    You are allowed to dislike a book, and honest one-star readers help everyone: they tell you exactly what a book does wrong before you spend ten hours on it.

Publish, Photograph, and Keep the Archive

16. **Disclose Free and Advance Copies Up Front**

    If a publisher, author, or shop sent you the book — print, ebook, or audio code — say so in plain words on the first line of the review, not buried at the end.

17. **Photograph the Book in Plain Daylight**

    One good photo beats five: lay the book flat on a neutral surface — a wooden table or a smoothed cotton sheet — near a window on an overcast day, so the light is even and glare stays off a glossy jacket.

18. **Edit in Ten Minutes with a Reader Test**

    Before you publish, run one test: someone who has not read the book should be able to say, after thirty seconds of skimming, whether it is for them and why.

19. Fix a Voice and a Reusable Review Shape

Readers come back to a reviewer the way they come back to a favorite shop assistant: not for the verdict on one book but for a recognizable way of thinking about many.

20. Keep a Searchable Archive of Every Review

Store each published review in one place with its date, title, author, your rating, the platform, the link, and a column noting whether the copy was free.

Sources

1. FTC's Endorsement Guides: What People Are Asking
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