

Guide to Writing a Review Essay

1. Select the books (ideally 3 to 4). They should be published in the last two to three years (i.e., if a person undertakes to write a review in 2016, the books published before 2013 should not be reviewed although they could be mentioned in the body of the review).
2. Open with an answer to the question: why this review now? Is there some new empirical development that needs to be captured? Is there some new methodological trend in use? Is there a new clutch of books that suggests a new theoretical debate that has emerged?
3. Put books in a larger context. What is the broad theme these books are addressing? (I.e., signal to fellow comparativists under what category to put this clutch of books). Do these books contribute to a debate on the role of institutions in politics? Or theories of democratization? Or the relation of politics and culture? Or the utility of rational choice analysis? Etc. etc....

Reflect a bit on the general state of the field on this issue. Do these books suggest a useful new trend/advance?

4. Offer a snapshot of each book.

The goal here is not to summarize the books. That would be impossible given the space constraints of a review essay. Rather the goal is to give the reader a sense of the essence of each book: What are the book's major empirical findings and/or theoretical lessons? Does it identify new concepts or conceptual tools that might be of use to other comparativists (if so, define)? What general lesson does the book offer for comparative politics? What is its theoretical pay-off? Its "punchline"? What is this book a "place holder" for in a larger debate in comparative politics? (E.g., where might it fit in a syllabus?) Why might a comparativist who is not engaged in the specific subfield of the book be interested in this book (if at all)? Be critical. Assess both the book's strengths and weaknesses, methodologically and empirically. Reflect on how the books in the review speak to each other (Complement? Contradict?).

The primary goal of these reviews is to provide a service to colleagues who want to keep up with the latest literature but don't have time to read it all. These reviews help colleagues decide what they might add to their syllabi and what they must read. It also gives them a sense of general trends in the field outside their specialization. So write with these goals in mind.

5. Conclude with a restatement of the advance in the field represented by these books. Then, based on their lacunae (methodological? empirical?) and on questions suggested by their interaction, propose new directions for future research. What ought to be the subfield's next research agenda?