

As a literature major, teacher, and professional writer, I have had to deal with many different challenging tasks. I have had to write both creative and nonfiction essays, short stories, reports of various kinds, and other pieces too numerous to mention. It may surprise you that book reviews are some of the most difficult things I've had to write. Almost everyone has seen a lousy book review - in many newspapers that is all he gets printed! Many of the worst ones are actually book summaries. They tell everything that happens in the book with no regard to the pleasure of the reader. Rather than tantalizingly with a few key facts, evaluating the book, and letting you explore it if you want to, they actually ruin it. Although it is easier to write this style of book review, it is also sloppy writing.

When I teach my introductory composition classes, people often look for book summaries. Although few of my students are dishonest enough to use downloadable book reports from the Internet, many of them wants an aid to help them understand the book. I used to think that this was just laziness, but now I see what's really going on. A lot of our children are not really learning to read like competent adults. Rather than digesting and evaluating a book themselves, they look to a book review or summary to tell them what it is about. They don't really have the critical skills to trust their own judgment, and they don't know how to ask questions.

With this in mind, I usually give a few easy assignments at the beginning of my writing class. I don't ask them to write a book review or a book report, a creative essay or an original work of fiction. I simply asked them to react to what they have read. The only rule is that they are not allowed to discuss the book with others or use outside sources. The whole point of this exercise is to loosen them up as writers. Later on, I have them read book reviews to understand how critics approach books, but in the beginning I want them to gain some confidence in their own abilities. Most of them find out once they learn how to open up a little bit that they understand books better than they thought. This is the first step towards becoming a good reader and a good writer.