

CRITICAL COMPARATIVE BOOK REVIEW

Object: This assignment is designed to introduce and cultivate critical reading and thinking skills, develop information literacy, and engage students in the academic writing process.

Assignment:

Pick a person of interest, within the bounds of the course, and read two biographies of that person (at least 150 pgs each). After reading each biography, write a critical review of the two books of 4-6 typed, double-spaced pages. In addition to evaluating each book for its own merits, you will also compare and contrast the two books.

These are to be CRITICAL book reviews, meaning that you will need to analyze each book carefully, and then weigh them against each other. Among the questions you should consider are:

Why did the author of each book choose to write a biography of this person?

What was the purpose of each book? Does the author state a purpose?

What are the main arguments of each book?

What is the thesis?

Would you characterize each biography as sympathetic to the subject or critical?

Are you convinced by the arguments/thesis of each author?

What are the strengths and weaknesses of each book?

Can you discern a bias in the authors' work?

Which author does a better job explaining the life of the subject? Why?

How do the authors arguments compare?

Which author presents a more compelling or believable thesis?

Does it seem that the authors are purposely seeking to undermine the argument of the other?

If one of the biographies is written many years before the other, can you identify how historical events have shaped/changed the interpretation of the subject's life as reflected in the other biography?

Critical comparative book review assignment (cont'd)

These are just some of the questions to consider in your papers. The bottom line is that you are expected to engage the materials and ask why each author presents the life of the subject the way they do. All authors have an agenda. Part of your job, will be to find out as much about the authors as possible. This, in turn, will help inform your judgment when you begin trying to figure out each author's angle.

You will also need to research some background of the era in which your subject lived. Getting a little background will also help you to discern an author's interpretation. So, for example, if you were doing George Washington, you would want to read a little about the era of the Revolutionary War – just to get some of the basics of events and chronology. For this you might make use of encyclopedia articles or other reference sources that are reliable. **DO NOT USE WIKIPEDIA!**

ALL BOOKS MUST BE APPROVED BY THE INSTRUCTOR IN ADVANCE.

The assignment will be due in two stages:

- 1) Students must complete a library checklist relating to the assignment, and provide the instructor with full citations for each book in MLA style. Both the checklist and the citations for the two books will be handed in to the instructor in class. **Ask your instructor on what date he wants the checklist and citations handed in.**
- 2) **Ask your instructor on what date he wants the completed papers handed in.** The papers must begin with full MLA citations of the two books being reviewed. Late papers will be heavily penalized (a full letter grade).

Use the resources that are available to you: the instructor, the library, the Writing Center! Also, see the handout on writing a critical book review and tips to avoid plagiarism. Be warned: Plagiarism is a violation of college policy on academic dishonesty and will be subject to one or all of the following: failure of the assignment, failure of the class, suspension from the college, or expulsion from the college.