

How to gut a book

At university you should be reading in order to understand what it is that the author is trying to say to you. What is the point they are trying to make? And just as important, how successful are they?

Since the quality of an essay or other piece of work is significantly affected by how much you have read and understood, it is useful to be able to maximize the amount of meaning you can extract from your reading in the shortest possible time. This is where gutting books comes in.

What is gutting a book?

Gutting a book means quickly establishing the book's thesis (i.e. the main point the author is trying to make), together with the main lines of argument and the main evidence used to support those arguments. It can be a prelude to more detailed reading, or you might never need to look at the book again, depending on what you are trying to do and what you need to find out.

How do I do it?

You probably already know. A well-tested method is to follow the sequence below, taking notes as you go (remember to include page numbers, and mark out your own ideas as your own).

Table of contents

Can you spot any overall pattern to the book?

Are the subheadings listed?

Are there any tables, maps, or figures listed in the Contents that look particularly useful?

Introduction and Conclusion

Read both of these carefully

Write down the book's thesis!

Looking for summary of basic argument and perhaps types of evidence used

Note: the Introduction (occasionally the Preface) is usually where the author explains where their work fits within the relevant scholarly debates

Opening and closing paragraphs/sections of chapters

looking for basic point of each chapter, and what evidence will be cited

relate this back to the summary you got from Introduction and Conclusion

what fits where? Does the evidence seem to work?

This can be repeated for subheadings, if there are any/if they look useful

Skimming for interesting information

looking for evidence supporting (or failing to support) key concepts

are the tables helpful?

you should take some worthwhile details from at least one chapter

What will this achieve?

Once you have gutted a book, you should be able to answer the following questions:

What is the thesis of the book?

What is the main line of argument?

What kind of evidence is cited to support the argument?

Where does the book fit in the scholarly debates on the topic?

How convincing is the argument/evidence?

You should be able to gut a scholarly monograph in about an hour. This means it is likely that you will be able to extract a great deal more meaning from a great many more books in the same time it might normally take you to read just one or two.

Your lecturers commend this method to you.