

## RESEARCH SKILLS: EVALUATING A BOOK

### EVALUATING (AKA “GUTTING”) A BOOK

Academics often refer to “gutting” a book, that is, extracting the information one finds useful as quickly and efficiently as possible. This is the skill we will work on today.

While you are writing a research paper, it is only the rare book that you will want to read closely from cover to cover. Mostly, you will want to gut books, focusing on those portions that will help you develop your argument and passing quickly over the rest. This does not mean simply skimming through the pages to find a quote and paying no attention to the book’s larger purpose. Rather, it means making a quick survey of the book’s structure and argument, and using this to zero in on those portions of the work that address your research interest.

To do this effectively, you will need to understand the book’s anatomy. A typical academic book will include most or all of the following elements:

#### *I. The textual apparatus*

The textual apparatus includes all those parts of a book beyond the text itself. You can learn a great deal from these aspects, before you even begin to read a book. They may even help you decide whether to read a particular book or not.

- **Title page.** As in the case of an article, the title of a book will often tell you something about its analytical perspective. It has become the fashion in academic writing over the last few decades to give books subtitles, which often tell you even more (e.g., *Creating a Perfect World: Religious and Secular Utopias in Nineteenth-Century Ohio* or *Imagined States: Nationalism, Utopia, and Longing in Oral Cultures*). The title page will also usually contain some publishing information—the name of the publisher, and sometimes the location and/or year of publication.
- **Copyright page.** Usually the page following the title page, it will tell you the publisher, year of publication, and original date of publication (if different from the current edition’s publication date). The **publication date** may give you useful information about the context in which the book was written (see my lengthier comments regarding date from last week’s handout). If a book has been reprinted several times, it is most likely considered important in the field. If any chapters originally appeared as articles, you will find this information on the copyright page as well. The **publisher’s name** will in many cases tell you something. For instance, books published by university presses (e.g., University of California Press, New York University Press) have undergone the same kind of peer review as articles from most academic journals. Some of the largest popular presses have an academic wing, whose books are also peer reviewed—you can guess that this is probably the case if the author’s acknowledgments thank professors, university departments, etc., and it is definitely the case if s/he mentions “anonymous reviewers” who commented on the manuscript.
- **Table of contents.** By looking at the chapter titles in the table of contents, you can often get a good idea of whether any chapters address the issues that interest you, and which will be the most helpful. If only chapter 4 looks relevant to your project, you can probably proceed directly from the introduction to that chapter without reading the previous ones.
- **List of illustrations.** Not all books contain illustrations, but those that do usually have a list of their titles and where they appear in the book directly after the table of contents.

• **Acknowledgment/ Preface.** Acknowledgements may help you determine if the author wrote in an academic context or not, and especially in the former case, what the author's field of expertise is. Sometimes an acknowledgment or preface will also give you a sense of the author's perspective and what inspired him/her to write the book.

All of the preceding parts of a book come before the central text. The following parts of the textual apparatus appear in conjunction with or after the central text:

• **Footnotes/ Endnotes.** The trend in academic books is toward endnotes, which appear after the book's conclusion, but many books use footnotes (which appear at the bottom of the page). All information that is either a direct quotation, or a reference to another author's text or idea, should have a note. It is good to get into the habit of turning to the notes whenever you come across a point or a quote that is interesting, surprising, or puzzling to you. Find out where the information is coming from. If it seems useful, note down the source, and the page number(s) cited if that is relevant. If you read books without paying attention to the notes, you are missing much very important information.

**Note:** In edited volumes, notes are often placed directly after the end of each essay, rather than at the end of the book. Most books also start the numbering of notes over with each chapter, so if there are endnotes, make sure you are looking at the notes for the correct chapter—some endnote sections conveniently indicate at the top of the page which pages of the text they cover, ensuring that you are looking at the correct chapter's notes.

• **Bibliography.** The bibliography appears after the endnotes (if the book has these). Bibliographies contain a list of works consulted in writing a book, and they come in many styles. Some books divide bibliographies into categories (archival sources; primary sources; secondary sources, for instance). While most books' bibliographies include references to all works consulted, some include only works cited, and a few include only works cited more than once. What footnotes or endnotes include that bibliographical entries do not are specific page references. Bibliographies on the other hand contain an easily digestible list of what evidence the author used to support her/his argument, and which scholarly sources s/he considered most important.

• **Index.** The last section of an academic book is the index. Note that older books sometimes do not include an index, or include only an index of names. Most modern American books have indexes that cover all people, subjects, and events mentioned in the text. This can help you quickly find passages relevant to your research interest, or reveal if there even are any.

## *II. The text*

The textual apparatus will often tell you whether or not you want to read a book, and what parts you want to read. Once you have determined that some or all of a book may be useful, you must turn to the text. Your first glance at the text should focus on apprehending its functional organization (which you should already have a sense of from the textual apparatus), and zeroing in on the most important sections.

• **Introduction.** A good introduction should lay out the book's scholarly context, argument, and analytical approach (including what sources are included). Some will also present a detailed

assessment of the current literature on the book's topic.<sup>1</sup> Some will provide summaries of each chapter, and their relation to the larger project (edited collections of essays are especially likely to have summaries of the pieces). The introduction is the author's (or editor's) guide to the book, and can be enormously helpful in determining which parts of the book will be most useful.

**Note:** Book reviews, especially those published in peer reviewed journals, are usually brief (1-3 pages) and concisely lay out a book's argument, sources, and scholarly context. They can be extremely helpful at covering the same kind of information an introduction does, but from the point of view of another scholar rather than the author. Usually it is a good idea to look at two or more reviews, to ensure that you get a fair representation of the book's content.

• **Chapters.** In some books, the chapters may function very much like separate articles (in some cases, material in chapters was in fact originally presented as articles), with discrete introductions, bodies, and conclusions. Read them in the same manner as you would an article (see last week's handout). In other cases, the chapters are intended to fit together sequentially, building one overarching argument. Even in these cases, chapters are structured in the same way, though the structure may be less obvious.

• **Conclusion.** The conclusion, like the introduction, ties the themes of individual chapters together, and usually clearly articulates the book's significant findings.

Books that are primarily narrative, or offer general overviews of a subject, tend to follow a different kind of organization, often proceeding chronologically or thematically and simply providing information. While such books generally do not advance arguments, they can provide material which may help you support the argument you want to make in your research paper.

Though there is no specific order you need to follow when gutting a book, it is usually a good idea to get as much information from the textual apparatus as you can before delving into the book.

Evaluating a book that turns out to be useful might look like this:

1. Title page (.5 min)
2. Copyright page (.5 min)
3. Table of contents (.5 min)
4. Acknowledgments/ preface (.5 min)
5. Index (3 min)
6. Introduction (15 min)
7. Relevant chapter(s) and their notes (20 min)
8. Conclusion (10 min)
9. Bibliography (5 min)
10. Fill out worksheet (5 min)

Total time: 1 hour

In many cases, you will only proceed through the first few steps until you determine that the book is not useful for your project. For a useful book, you will need to return to it later and read the valuable sections thoroughly.

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<sup>1</sup>Often footnotes in the introduction will cite some of the most important literature on the topic, and it is worth paying special attention to them.

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For Wednesday's class, we will be working on evaluating books and articles efficiently. Please bring to class at least two items (ideally at least one book and one article) that you think might be useful for your research project, but which you have not looked at closely (bring just one of each if you are quite sure they will be useful to your project).

See if you can find a book review or abstract about each item, and bring these to class as well.

You should thus come to class with at least two items that you hope will be relevant to your research project. If you are still not sure of what topic you will write on, bring books or articles that look interesting, and might help you make up your mind.