



(Illustration by Reggie Torrez, Army Multimedia and Visual Information Division [OCPA], U.S. Army)

How to Write a Book Review

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The Army's journals have featured book reviews since their beginning.¹ Book reviews should describe whether a new book satisfies its thesis and identify who should read the book. On the first point, reviewers should only judge books by what they set out to do. On the second, reviewers should clearly and specifically identify who would find the book interesting or useful.

Book reviews benefit the Army profession and the Army professional. For the profession, reviews provide

numerous services. Reviews are a means of screening books of interest for military audiences. Given that more books are published than can possibly be read (or listened to), reviews also provide concise, critical summaries of important books for the busy professional. Unlike a unit reading program in which everyone reads and reflects on a single book or article, unit review programs can cover and critique many books on similar topics, building depth in an area important to a unit.² I implemented such a program like this when I

Table 1. Comparison of *Military Review* and *Parameters* Book Review Requirements

<i>Military Review</i>	<i>Parameters</i>
Type of book	Type of book
What the book says	Main argument
Authority of the book	Authority of book and sources
Special attractions or deficits	Contribution to the field
Relevance to the security community	Relevance to senior defense leaders

(Table by author)

commanded a company, leading to book reviews published in *Military Review* and *Parameters*.³

For the professional, book reviews improve critical thinking skills needed for success at places like the Command Assessment Program.⁴ Book reviews are also a straightforward way to jumpstart professional writing.⁵ Most military journals are looking for reviewers for new books, so a short email with your qualifications to the editor or book review editor may be all that is necessary to get started.

This how-to guide walks a potential reviewer through the whole process: getting a book, prereading the book, reading the book, and writing the review. Prospective reviewers can apply the approach below to any review, though reviews of fiction may require some adaptation. Throughout this article, I draw examples from Eliot Cohen's *The Hollow Crown*, which I reviewed as I wrote this piece.⁶

Types of Book Reviews

First, it is important to note that there are two main types of book reviews. This piece focuses on the six-hundred- to eight-hundred-word book reviews found traditionally in the back of the Army's journals. These reviews help readers identify and screen books. Alternatively, review essays either take a book as the starting point for a new but related essay or may review several books at once.⁷ They are a more advanced and less common form, and not the focus of this article. The Army's journals almost exclusively review new, nonfiction books.⁸

The Army's major outlets describe the key components of a book review with slight variation (see table 1). Whether you are reviewing for *Military Review*,

Parameters, or the Army's other branch journals, these lists of questions are good guidelines to consider as you review the book.⁹

Reviewing the Book

Reviewing a book requires identifying a book of interest and obtaining an assignment from a journal to review that book. Personal interest is critical! You will spend hours reading, critically analyzing, and writing about this book. Once you have identified the book, reach out to your desired journal's editor or book review editor.

Your pitch to the editor should help them rapidly assess your proposal and determine whether they can obtain a review copy for you. You should also include why you are qualified to review the book. In many cases, serving as an officer or noncommissioned officer in a given field is sufficient. If you have additional expertise—like related education, operational assignments, or previous publications—flag those for the editors in writing or an attached resume to strengthen your case as the right person to review the book. In all, a pitch to an editor might look like this:

Good morning,

I request to review *The Hollow Crown* by Eliot Cohen.

The Hollow Crown, published by Basic Books in the fall of 2023, distills Professor Cohen's class on Shakespeare and power from Johns Hopkins for a national security audience—and would certainly be of interest for Army officers experiencing "court intrigue" in the upper echelons of the interagency. To

this review, I'd bring my experience as a lieutenant colonel in the Army Special Forces, who has worked on high-level "courts" at the National Security Council and in the Office of the Chief of Staff of the Army. I have also attached my resume.

Please let me know if you are interested in a review of *The Hollow Crown*.

Ideally, the editor accepts your proposal and then sends you the book to review.¹⁰ If your proposal is accepted, journals will typically provide you a deadline of about six weeks after receiving the book. While this is often negotiable, plan to rapidly read and review the book.

Prereading the book. Reading a book that you are reviewing differs in intensity and focus from just reading a book, so plan to preread it first. When you receive the book, heft it. Consider it. I found that *The Hollow Crown* comes in an attractive blue book jacket over a medium-length book of 277 pages. The prominent subtitle, "Shakespeare on How Leaders Rise, Rule, and Fall," makes the book's purpose clear.

Next, dive into the front matter. This part of the book may contain title pages, quotes, praise for the book, a page with print and copyright information, a dedication, table of contents, preface, and a foreword by someone other than the author.

The Hollow Crown opens with a "Praise" section inside the front cover. This section reveals that the book is aimed at an audience of national security leaders. The copyright page reveals that the publisher is Basic Books. A quick Google search finds that Basic is a reputable publisher of award-winning and influential books.

Finally, I come to the contents. The contents are admirably well organized into three parts, each with three chapters and an introduction and conclusion starting and ending the book. The section and chapter titles also imply a clear organization. For example, Part I is called "Acquiring Power," and the three chapters are called "Inheriting It," "Acquiring It," and "Seizing It." Pretty clear.

Next, flip each page through to the back of the book. As you come across figures or pictures, take a moment to admire each one. Consider the frequency and how easily you can interpret each figure or table. *The Hollow Crown* has no figures, but the large number of block quotes is obvious, even from a cursory scan.

Once you arrive at the back of the book, consider the acknowledgments, notes, index, and author biography. Cohen's acknowledgments state clearly that this book caps off his career as a national security professional and academic, distilling a half century of studying politics and Shakespeare under great teachers.

Following the acknowledgments, reviewing the book's notes provides a sense of how meticulously the book was researched but can also reveal reliance on a few sources if you find the same source again and again.¹¹ After the notes, you'll usually come to the index. Based on your personal interests, see whether the index helps you find relevant material. Better indexes are topically organized, while others list proper nouns. If a reader is not generally familiar with the material, the latter are much less helpful.

My cursory scan of *The Hollow Crown*'s eight-page index suggests the book will focus on personal examples of leadership and power. Beyond Shakespearean characters, several famous names jump out with lengthy sections in the index—Adolf Hitler, Winston Churchill, Abraham Lincoln—while names like Queen Elizabeth I and Dwight Eisenhower appear with single line entries. Likewise, concepts like fear, murder, and management also appear in the index. In all, *The Hollow Crown*'s index appears strong as is expected from a well-known publisher.

While you are at the back of the book, review the author's biography. If you have not already, take a moment to understand how this book fits into the author's broader writings. After concluding this study of the book, its front matter, and the back matter, I am primed for *The Hollow Crown* to be a serious book.

But before you jump deep into the book, consider jotting down a few notes. I make marks in colored ink in the book's margins and also write notes inside the back cover. Underlining feels good, but I rarely recall why I underlined something later, and underlines do not jump out as strongly as a short marginal note.

Finally, consider looking at other reviews. The benefits of looking at the reviews of others include understanding

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other perspectives, but they may also anchor or bias your read. However, I sometimes find books that I want to review through different reviews, so other reviews are not always avoidable.

With your preread complete, you are ready to read the book.

Reading the book. Rather than reading directly through from beginning to end, I recommend starting

The organizing concept of this book, which informs its structure, is the arc of power—namely, the ways in which it is acquired (by inheritance, struggle, or coup), how it is exercised (inspiration, manipulation, and crime), and how it is lost (arrogance, self-deception, and voluntary relinquishment).

Readers should look for a similarly clear statement of

“While the title suggests the book might focus on all of thirty-eight plays, two narrative poems, 154 sonnets, and other poems, he focuses only on the ‘better-known tragedies ... and the histories’ and then further focuses on those ‘in which power is a central preoccupation.’”

nonfiction books with the first chapter, then reading the last chapter, and then reading the book from the second chapter through to the last. You should also develop an appreciation for how the book’s structure will help support the thesis and the conclusions.¹²

As you read the introductory chapter, pay special attention to the book’s thesis and how the author scopes the work. Ultimately, book reviewers should judge books based on the author’s intent. By understanding the intent, you can decide whether the book adequately supports the thesis. The first chapter should also convey why the book was written, identify the research question, define key terms, and situate the book with other books in the same field. These details are all critical to the success of your review.

Cohen effectively delivers this information in *The Hollow Crown*. Cohen provides the thesis eight pages into the first chapter. After teasing the idea of narrative arcs over several pages, Cohen’s thesis argues that Shakespeare’s most powerful political insights “reveal how leaders evolve, for better or worse, and why easy assumptions about leaders becoming more seasoned and cautious as they age may be wrong.”¹³ He also describes why he selected the organizing principle seen in the table of contents, which focused on narrative arcs around acquiring power, exercising power, and losing power. Consider this clear statement of structure:

the book’s thesis and structure as they read the first chapter. And do not forget this thesis, as it forms the basis for your review. Consider bookmarking the page where you found the thesis for easy reference.

The first chapters should provide other important information necessary to review the book. Early in the introduction, Cohen narrows the possibly wide scope. While the title suggests the book might focus on all of thirty-eight plays, two narrative poems, 154 sonnets, and other poems, he focuses only on the “better-known tragedies ... and the histories” and then further focuses on those “in which power is a central preoccupation.”¹⁴ He then reminds the reader that the interpretation he presents is influenced by his personal experiences with “people wielding power in government” and other places.¹⁵ Finally, in terms of intended readership, Cohen clearly states that he “assumes no deep familiarity with Shakespeare’s plays” and aims the book at those seeking to understand politics, especially the “court” politics present near those who wield power.¹⁶

Taken together, these details should strongly inform your review. The thesis is vital to answering the first question of a book review: Does the book accomplish what it intended to? Likewise, the careful scoping of the subject material and his influence on the interpretation form potential assessment measures for the book. This material will also inform your answer to the big second question: Who should read

the book? Reviewers should assess whether the author effectively reaches the intended audience, and how that intended audience aligns with the readers of your target outlet. Armed with these details, flip immediately to the last chapter.

In the concluding chapter, expect authors to restate the thesis and briefly review the principal points from the book. More scholarly works will point out remaining open questions for scholars and make recommendations for action. Understanding these points early in your reviewing process can help identify any mismatches between the expectations set out in the first chapter and the conclusions in the last while also scaffolding your read of the book.

Having pre-read the book and then closely studied the introduction and conclusion, the reviewer should again jot down notes in the margins or at the back of the book. Write out the thesis as you understand it. Make note of any discrepancies or apparent evolution in the author's thinking so that you may refer to key passages as you read the book. With your notes complete, read the book.

As you read the rest of the book, take notes of points of clarification, areas of strength, or questions that arise. For example, alongside a paragraph on how *The Hollow Crown* is a product of a course at Johns Hopkins, I note "course → book" in the margin, simply explaining what is in that important paragraph for easy reference later. Keeping the thesis in mind as you read will help you identify points for your critique. Make margin notes or endnotes as you come across passages that reinforce or contradict the author's main points for reference as you write your review.

Writing the Review

Standard book reviews are formulaic. They must start with an engaging hook, provide an argument about the book's quality, contain a summary, critique the book's strengths and weaknesses, and then conclude with a restatement of an opinion on the book and who should read the book.

To start my review, I draft an outline with the headings in table 2 and fill it in from the notes I left in the back of the book and my memory. I then progressively flush out each section until satisfied with the prose, combine them into a cohesive whole, and edit.

There are two imperatives for the book review: they must be concise and entertaining. At under eight

Table 2. Generic Book Review Structure

Hook
Introduction
Main argument
Summary
Strengths
Critiques
Conclusion and reader recommendation

(Table by author)

hundred words, book reviews are not exhaustive treatments of books. The reviewer must touch on the key points and include brief illustrative examples. To entertain, book reviews are appropriate times to pull out all your tricks: alliteration, metaphor or simile, varied sentence structure for dramatic effect, and the rest. As book review readers are likely to skim the work, entertaining prose and clear, concise topic sentences are especially important.

The hook. In selecting this book, I hoped that *The Hollow Crown* would help me understand my experiences at the National Security Council. It did. And my time there offers a suitable hook that also gently introduces the book's focus on how leaders acquire power, exercise power, and lose power: "Although I was familiar with court intrigue, I was not prepared for the National Security Council's intrigue."¹⁷

In this hook, an opening short paragraph aims to capture the reader's eye while the initial clause invites the reader to question whether they have felt court intrigue in their careers.

The introduction. The next paragraph provides examples of the dynamics that Cohen discusses in *The Hollow Crown*, while the final paragraph of the introduction makes a case for why this book could be helpful for national security leaders today. By the end of this introduction, readers remaining with the review are ready for more.

One might enter as an editor in the Executive Secretariat and then leap into a role as a senior adviser for a deputy national security

adviser. Others held court in deputies' or principals' meetings for many years, deftly staying above the fray. Still others fell, finding knives in their backs as other strivers seized their spots. While this court intrigue is tame compared to the murder and magic of William Shakespeare's plays, Professor Eliot Cohen shows how much we can learn from the Bard. Indeed, one need not squint hard to see that courts continue to run most human organizations today.¹⁸

of the book and the book's contribution to the field. The paragraphs below summarize the book and provides illustrative examples of the ways that Cohen integrates Shakespeare into his book. Given the eight-hundred-word limit, devoting 122 words to summary is appropriate.

Readers will become familiar with the book's rhythm. In each chapter, Cohen first defines the chapter's subject, provides motivating modern examples, pivots to illustrative lessons from Shakespeare, and concludes by applying

“*The Hollow Crown* effectively explores Shakespeare's political insights into how leaders evolve. While never explicitly stated, Cohen draws on Shakespearean examples to advocate for an ideal arc.”

The main argument. The next section should introduce the book, state the thesis, and provide a judgment on whether the book satisfies the thesis. Drawing from the thesis at the beginning of the book and the slightly evolved thesis in the final chapter, the first sentence of this section includes the book's name, a judgment (“effectively”), and a statement of the thesis. I then describe my interpretation of the book's core message: how Cohen believes leaders should rise, rule, and exit.

The Hollow Crown effectively explores Shakespeare's political insights into how leaders evolve. While never explicitly stated, Cohen draws on Shakespearean examples to advocate for an ideal arc. Leaders should acquire power legitimately or seize power when a ruler is weak. They should rule through inspiration and manipulation (with only the occasional murder). Then, rulers should depart the stage in their prime. Cohen explores this arc through an expertly organized book divided into parts on acquiring, exercising, and losing power, subdivided into three appropriately named chapters.¹⁹

The summary. Reviewers will sometimes lose their way in the summary section, preferring the comfort of summarizing the book to the critique. In this section, I touch on *Parameters*' questions about the authority

the lessons to recent cases. In the chapter on murder, Cohen explains that murder might literally mean killing others (see Pol Pot, Joseph Stalin, for example), or less literally, the unexpected departure of senior executives to new and undefined opportunities elsewhere. Examples from Henry VI, Richard III, and Macbeth show the early benefits and ultimate risks of ruling through murder, which Cohen effectively compares to the individual rises of Adolf Hitler and Xi Jinping. This effective structure allows chapters to stand on their own while remaining part of a cohesive whole.²⁰

This next paragraph helps answer a likely question for any potential reader: How well do I need to know Shakespeare to enjoy this book? It also reveals my limited authority for judging his inclusion of Shakespeare, while clarifying that those less familiar with Shakespeare could benefit from reading the book.

A deep appreciation for Shakespeare's works is not required to enjoy the book. Readers familiar with Shakespeare will enjoy how *The Hollow Crown* integrates and explains his plays related to power. Readers like me, with a passing familiarity from plebe English and high school, will find much to appreciate—and

might also find themselves inspired to reread *Macbeth* or *Henry VI*.²¹

Finally, this paragraph situates *The Hollow Crown* in the existing literature. When situating a book, consider the journal's audience. While not all of *Parameters'* readers will have read *Master of the Senate*, Robert Caro's tome is famous enough that most will be familiar with it. I am especially fond of *On Leadership*, so I included that positivist view on leadership, while nearly all *Parameters* readers will be familiar with *A Message to Garcia's* messages of diligence and honesty.

The Hollow Crown occupies an unusual literary space but would rest easily on a bookshelf alongside biographies and excellent leadership texts. Its most direct parallel is likely *Lincoln and Shakespeare* by Michael Anderegg (University Press of Kansas, 2015). Readers will find much in common, however, with books like Robert A. Caro's *Master of the Senate* (Knopf, 2002), which explores Lyndon B. Johnson's manipulative leadership style. *The Hollow Crown* also offers a more cynical counterpoint to more affirmative leadership books like John W. Gardner's *On Leadership* (Free Press, 1990) or Elbert Hubbard's classic 1899 essay, "A Message to Garcia."²²

The strengths. A review must also touch honestly on a book's strengths and weaknesses. To signal the skimming reader a transition to the book's strengths, I started this section with "At its best" and then offered a broad topic sentence that covers the two examples of strengths that follow. In the subsequent paragraph, I signal that I am touching on another strength with the words "also" and "delight."

At its best, *The Hollow Crown* helps readers see common challenges in new ways. Cohen deliberately tackles a common belief that leaders improve with time. Through the examples of *Henry VI* and *Macbeth*, he shows that isolation, arrogance, and poor selection of subordinates can undermine initially savvy leaders. Also relevant to military readers, Cohen expertly explores perceptions of strength and weakness in *Richard III* in his chapter on murder. Richard most admires those willing to murder on his behalf, as these hard men mirror his lack of sentimentality. His reliance on these hard

men, however, is his undoing, leaving Richard unhorsed and dead on the battlefield. Leaders today would do well to abide by these lessons.

Cohen's prose is also a delight. Lines like "Kings who wish they were carefree shepherds often end up as slaughtered sheep" and "Leaders who are lions, however, do not have to tell their underlings that is what they are" demonstrate Cohen's inspiration from Shakespeare's excellent writing (188, 194).²³

The critique. *The Hollow Crown* is a strong book that largely delivers. One area where I felt slightly deceived is the early emphasis on court intrigue that is largely absent throughout the book. As an officer working on a general's personal staff, likely to come across more courts in the future, I would benefit from greater instruction from Shakespeare on how to do this well, so I made this point in my brief critique.

Despite the book's strengths, most readers will see themselves as courtiers instead of kings, and *The Hollow Crown* focuses more on these "kings," despite Cohen's claim that "courts are the central point in the vortex of power" (23). Short sections on court politics and evaluating subordinates are helpful but insufficient for those courtiers on the sidelines.²⁴

The conclusion and reader recommendation. Book reviews should conclude with a restatement of your argument on whether the book satisfies its thesis and a recommendation on who should read the book. The restatement of my argument reminds readers of the initial hook in the National Security Council and connects that thesis to potential readers. I then provide a few specific thoughts on who would benefit from reading this book. I deliberately conclude on the ambitious, to whom Cohen has provided *The Hollow Crown* as more of a warning than a blueprint.

Eliot Cohen's *The Hollow Crown* gave me insight into the rise, rule, and fall of members of the National Security Council, and it will help readers understand power, leadership, and the dynamics of courts. Scholars' programs at the Command and General Staff College and US Army War College would benefit from the unique perspective of this book. Others who would benefit from this book's insights include readers preparing to serve on a high-level

personal staff, those soldiers with a literary bent, or the ambitious among us.²⁵

Once complete, send the review off to the journal's editor.²⁶ Book reviews should thoughtfully review a book but are not the last word. Reviewers should not stress too much but rather write reviews that adequately represent the book, provide thoughtful critiques, and screen the book for other busy professionals.

Conclusion

Individuals, units, and the Army profession all benefit from robust book review sections in the Army's journals. Reviewers benefit through improved

critical thinking, developing expertise, and obtaining books. Readers benefit from reviews that help them screen books or from the summaries they provide. Units benefit from reviewing programs that build expertise through critical reading and writing—or from reviews that help them find books of interest. Finally, the profession benefits when more leaders can think and write critically, screen books quickly, or review the high points of books they cannot find time to read.

Book reviews are good for the profession and good for the author. Follow these simple instructions and publish one soon. ■

Notes

1. Alison Moulds and Beth Gaskell, "Crafting the Professional Reader: Book Reviews in the Military and Medical Press," *Victorian Periodicals Review* 55, no. 2 (June 2022): 217–36, <https://doi.org/10.1353/vpr.2022.0014>.

2. Joe Byerly, "How to Develop a Unit Reading Program," From the Green Notebook, 14 September 2020, <https://fromthegreennotebook.com/2020/09/14/how-to-develop-a-unit-reading-program/>.

3. Lee Namy, review of *The Politics of War Powers: The Theory and History of Presidential Unilateralism*, by Sarah Burns, *Military Review* (website), 3 April 2020, <https://www.armyupress.army.mil/Journals/Military-Review/MR-Book-Reviews/April-2020/Book-Review-002/>; Jacob Shelton, review of *Moscow Rules: What Drives Russia to Confront the West*, by Giles Kier, *Parameters* 51, no. 2 (18 May 2021), <https://doi.org/10.55540/0031-1723.3073>.

4. Everett Spain, "Reinventing the Leader Selection Process," *Harvard Business Review*, November–December 2020, <https://hbr.org/2020/11/reinventing-the-leader-selection-process>.

5. Jay Ireland and Ryan Van Wie, "Aligning Incentives: Professional Writing in the Army's Operational Domain," *Military Review* Online Exclusive, 9 February 2024, <https://www.armyupress.army.mil/journals/military-review/online-exclusive/2024-ole/aligning-incentives/>.

6. Eliot A. Cohen, *The Hollow Crown: Shakespeare on How Leaders Rise, Rule, and Fall* (New York: Basic Books, 2023), <https://www.hachettebookgroup.com/titles/eliot-a-cohen/the-hollow-crown/9781541644861/?lens=basic-books>.

7. See Douglas Lute and Jordan Becker, review of *America's Great-Power Opportunity: Revitalizing U.S. Foreign Policy to Meet the Challenges of Strategic Competition*, by Ali Wyne, *Military Review* 103, no. 1 (January–February 2023): 143–47; Zachary Griffiths, "Waugh We Fight," *War on the Rocks*, 10 November 2023, <https://warontherocks.com/2023/11/waugh-we-fight/>. Outlets like *Foreign Affairs* often publish review essays that review multiple books on a single theme. For more discussion of types of reviews, see Adam Garfinkle, "The Review," in *Political Writing: A Guide to the Essentials*, 1st ed. (New York: Routledge, 2012), 87–99.

8. Thomas Bruscino, "Dusting Off the Dusty Shelves," *Dusty Shelves* (blog), War Room, 20 September 2019, <https://warroom.armywarcollege.edu/special-series/dusty-shelves/dusting-off/>.

9. Military Review Staff, "Book Review Submission Guide," Army University Press, accessed 8 April 2024, <https://www.armyupress.army.mil/Journals/Military-Review/MR-Book-Review-Submission-Guide/>; Parameters Staff, "Book Review Guidelines," U.S. Army War College, accessed 8 April 2024, https://media.defense.gov/2023/Apr/13/2003199232/-1/-1/1/PARAMETERS_BOOKREVIEWER-GUIDELINES_20230306.PDF.

10. The least preferred method is to write a review and then shop around the completed review. While this may work, many outlets do not take unsolicited reviews. Obtaining an assignment from an editor is the best way.

11. You might also find these as listed citations, bibliography, or other names.

12. Some readers may wonder about whether they can review a book by listening to it. I find it harder to focus on and flag particular issues when I listen to books and, therefore, recommend a hard copy for reviewing, though digital copies present the advantages of search and digital tagging.

13. "William Shakespeare Biography," Shakespeare Birthplace Trust, accessed 8 April 2024, <https://www.shakespeare.org.uk/explore-shakespeare/shakespeadia/william-shakespeare/william-shakespeare-biography/>; Cohen, *The Hollow Crown*, 8.

14. Cohen, *The Hollow Crown*, 9.

15. *Ibid.*, 8.

16. *Ibid.*, 248–9.

17. Zachary Griffiths, review of *The Hollow Crown: Shakespeare on How Leaders Rise, Rule, and Fall*, by Eliot A. Cohen, *Parameters* 54, no. 2 (Summer 2024): 169, <https://press.armywarcollege.edu/parameters/vol54/iss2/15>.

18. *Ibid.*

19. *Ibid.*

20. *Ibid.*

21. *Ibid.*, 170.

22. *Ibid.*

23. *Ibid.*

24. *Ibid.*

25. *Ibid.*, 170–71.

26. *Ibid.*, 169–71.