

Evaluating Review Content for Book Selection: An Analysis of American History Reviews in *Choice*, *American Historical Review*, and *Journal of American History*

Allen Natowitz and Paula Wheeler Carlo

This study applies content analysis to compare assessments of 153 titles in American history, each reviewed in *Choice*, *American Historical Review* (*AHR*), and *Journal of American History* (*JAH*) between 1988 and 1995. A numerical rating system is used to quantify reviewers' overall opinions and their use of specific evaluative criteria. Study findings include: most books were praised in all three journals; the mean overall rating was highest in *Choice* and lowest in *JAH*; little agreement existed in identifying either outstanding titles or inferior titles; reviews in *Choice* contained the fewest evaluative criteria, but appeared 8.5 to 10.6 months prior to reviews of the same titles in *JAH* and *AHR*.

Book reviews have repeatedly been identified as major determinants in the library acquisitions process.¹ However, despite the widely acknowledged importance of book reviewing, researchers have indicated the need for more critical evaluations of reviews.² The authors examined this subject by conducting a comparative analysis of American history book reviews in three highly regarded journals. Among them, *Choice* is identified as the primary review medium for academic libraries. The other publications, *Journal of American History* (*JAH*) and *American Historical Review*

(*AHR*), are two of the most important journals for specialists in U. S. history. The authors set out to determine the degree to which book reviews in *AHR*, *JAH*, and *Choice* provide collection development specialists with qualitative assessments on which to base their acquisition choices. To achieve this, the contents of 459 book reviews (of 153 American history books reviewed in each of the three journals) were analyzed. In addition to the overall opinion expressed in each review, the authors' analysis considered the ways in which each of seven evaluative criteria was employed in these reviews.

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Review of Literature

Some studies of the general characteristics of American history book reviews already have been conducted. In particular, Bilhartz analyzed book reviews published over a thirty-year period in *JAH* to determine changing perceptions of what constitutes “good history.”³ Casey examined multiple reviews of one hundred titles in American history and found that 82 percent of the reviews were favorable or enthusiastic, and 18 percent were unfavorable or harshly negative.⁴

Choice publishes reviews of more than 6,000 books annually,

To the authors’ knowledge, however, the issue of reviewer consensus regarding the same titles in history has not been sufficiently explored. Although some studies have been conducted in other disciplines, they have led to divergent conclusions.⁵ In pursuit of this issue, the present study explores the degree to which book selectors can expect to find reviewer consensus for the same books in three important academic publications. As Fisher has remarked: “Readers have the right to know what to expect from the review section in different journals.”⁶

Characteristics of the Three Journals

With a circulation of 4,000, *Choice* is published eleven times a year under the auspices of ACRL.⁷ Since its inception in 1964, its primary purpose has been “to fill an informational need for college libraries. . . .”⁸ It has been identified as “the most influential review organ for academic publications” and “is a basic selection tool for academic librarians.”⁹ Unlike subject-specific journals (such as *AHR* and *JAH*), *Choice* publishes reviews of titles in the humanities, science and technology, social and behavioral sciences, as well as reference works. Its reviewers include “college and university faculty who are actively teaching in the subject areas that

they review.”¹⁰ The typical *Choice* review of 175 to 200 words is briefer than a review in either of the history journals. In this limited space, reviewers are expected to consider a book’s value to an undergraduate collection, analyze qualifications of the author(s), compare a book to similar titles, and assess its strengths and weaknesses.¹¹ *Choice* publishes reviews of more than 6,000 books annually, or 28 to 29 percent of all books received.¹² Approximately 350 of these reviews appear in *Choice*’s categories of North American history, geography, and area studies.

AHR, the official journal of the American Historical Association, has been in existence since 1895. It is published five times a year and has a circulation of 23,000.¹³ Although *AHR* contains scholarly articles in all fields of history, “more than half of this important bibliographic source is taken up by reviews.”¹⁴ *AHR* publishes more reviews than any other scholarly journal, more than 1,000 a year from about 4,000 books received by its editors.¹⁵ According to William Bishel, *AHR*’s Assistant Editor for Book Reviews, “most historians would admit that the *AHR* is the ‘journal of record’ in our discipline.”¹⁶ *AHR* reviewers are required (in most cases) to have published at least one original book-length monograph. Reviews range from 500 to 1,000 words in length (though typically fall between 600 and 650 words).¹⁷ The journal provides no specific guidelines for review content other than that the reviewer “should give a clear assessment of the book’s content and a critical assessment of its contribution to knowledge in the field.”¹⁸

JAH appears four times a year and is published under the auspices of the Organization of American Historians, which is the primary scholarly organization for American history specialists.¹⁹ From its inception in 1914 until 1964, it was known as the *Mississippi Valley Historical Review*. Unlike *AHR*, which covers all areas of history, *JAH* concentrates on American history. Like *AHR*, its primary readers are academicians. With a circulation of about 12,000, it has been described as a “substan-

tive bibliographic source and a basic journal for any library collecting in the field.”²⁰ Similar to *AHR*, reviewers are expected to have major publications in the area(s) they are reviewing. *JAH* publishes fewer reviews per year than *AHR*—600 as opposed to 1,000—but because all of them are in American history, its coverage in this area is more thorough than *AHR*'s. The typical review is 500 words in length, although some are 400 words long and others are longer.²¹ Like *AHR*, *JAH* offers reviewers no specific guidelines.

Methodology

According to Krippendorff, “Content analysis is a research technique for making replicable and valid inferences from data in their context.”²² Allen and Reser point out that content analysis has been applied to a variety of library and information science questions, and conclude that this methodology has considerable potential for research.²³ It was selected by the authors as an appropriate tool for quantifying data in order to determine how frequently certain characteristics or categories appear in book reviews. However, despite its successful application in a wide variety of research topics, Busha and Harter have advised that in order for content analysis to function effectively as a system of measurement, categories must be defined clearly and accurately, and the classification and measurement of data must be undertaken with objectivity, exactness, and rigor.^{24,25}

A number of book-length monographs provide detailed descriptions of content analysis methodology.²⁶ The following discussion of the process derives from the work of Budd, Thorp, and Donohew.²⁷

Effective content analysis begins by accurately formulating the research question. This study asks: What is the comparative value of the content of reviews published in *Choice*, *AHR*, and *JAH* for purposes of book selection?

Selecting a sample is the next step in content analysis. This study initially sampled a total of 375 reviews of American history titles published in *Choice* at

five-month intervals, between September 1988 and September 1993. Of these, 153 titles also were reviewed in *AHR* (between June 1989 and December 1994) and *JAH* (between December 1988 and March 1995).

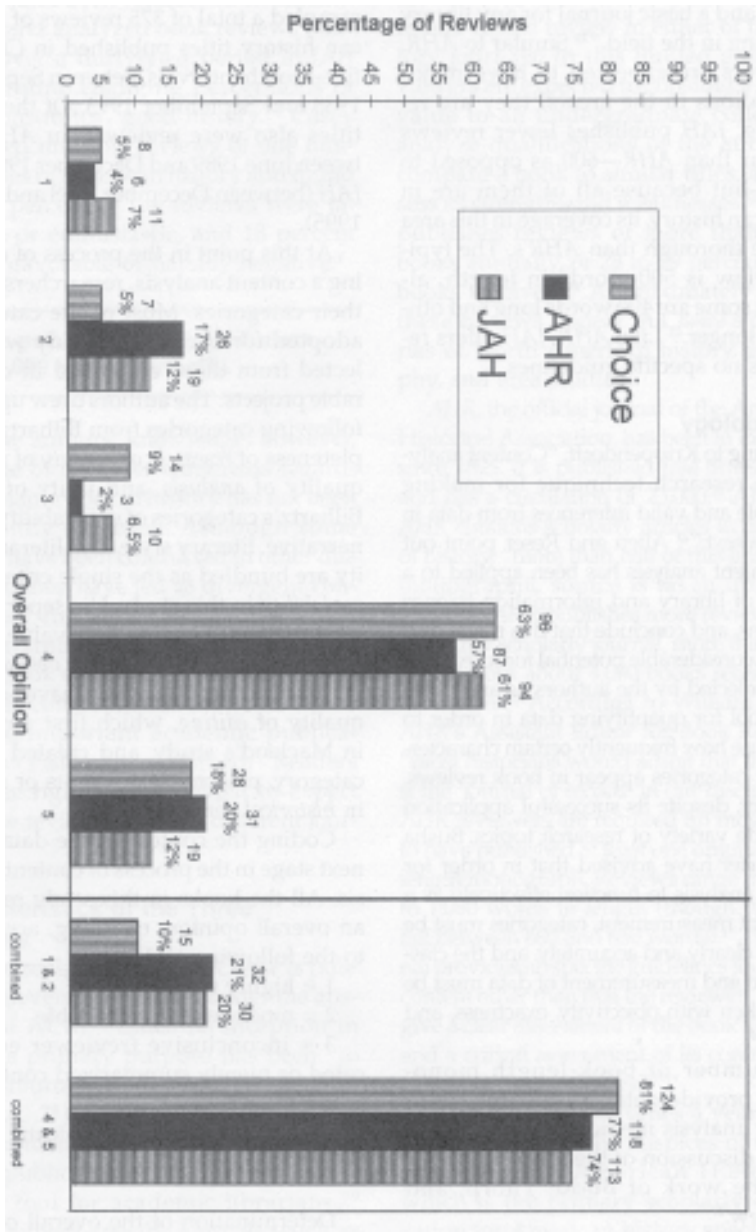
At this point in the process of executing a content analysis, researchers define their categories. Most of the categories adopted for use in this study were selected from those employed in comparable projects. The authors drew upon the following categories from Bilhartz: completeness of *research*, *objectivity* of author, quality of *analysis*, and unity of *thesis*. Bilhartz's categories of enjoyability of the narrative, literary style, and literary clarity are bundled as the single criterion of *readability* in this study. His separate criteria of overall rating and value to the field are combined here as *overall opinion*. In addition, the authors have adopted quality of *editing*, which first appeared in Macleod's study, and created a new category, placement of events or subject in *historical context*.²⁸

Coding the content of the data is the next stage in the process of content analysis. All the books in this study received an overall opinion, or rating, according to the following scale:²⁹

- 1 = highly unfavorable
- 2 = moderately unfavorable
- 3 = inconclusive (reviewer equivocated or merely summarized content)
- 4 = favorable
- 5 = outstanding or significant contribution to the field

Determination of the overall opinion was influenced by the general tone of a review as well a reviewer's opening or concluding comments (e.g., not recommended = 1; superlative or major work = 5). The overall opinion did not necessarily reflect an accumulation of references to particular evaluative criteria. Reviews also were scrutinized for the presence or absence of the following criteria (mentioned earlier):

FIGURE 1
Comparative Distribution of Overall Opinion (by number and percentage)*



*Rated on a scale of 1 (lowest) to 5 (highest)

- quality or originality of analysis;
- quality of narrative, or readability (including style, clarity, lucidity, interest, etc.);
- unity of thesis;
- quality of editing;
- completeness of research (including factual accuracy);
- placement of events or subject in historical context;
- objectivity of author (including the absence or presence of bias).

These criteria were coded according to the following staggered scale:

- 0 = criterion not mentioned
- 1 = negative comments
- 3 = neutral or equivocal comments
- 5 = positive comments

The authors applied the criteria to a sample of reviews, then compared results in order to standardize and refine the use of these evaluative categories. Once definitions and guidelines were agreed upon, the authors coded the data and concurred as to their accuracy.

The next step in content analysis is to scale items. This process is discussed in the following section of this study. The final stage, interpretation, appears in the study's concluding section.

Findings and Results

How do the distributions for overall opinion compare among the three journals for the 153 titles reviewed in common?

Favorably assessed books (overall opinion = 4) comprised a majority of titles, ranging from 57 to 63 percent across all the journals (see figure 1). Books deemed outstanding or significant contributions to the field (overall opinion = 5) were a distant second in frequency, claiming between 12 and 20 percent of the assessments. Together, favorably assessed and outstanding books comprised 74 percent of all reviews in *JAH*, 77 percent in *AHR*, and 81 percent in *Choice*.

At the opposite end of the ratings spectrum, highly unfavorable reviews of books (overall opinion = 1) rarely appeared, comprising less than 7 percent of reviews in any one of the journals. Inconclusive reviews, which were equivocal or merely summarized book content (overall opinion = 3), amounted to less than 9 percent of reviews in any one of the journals. Hence, the data reveal a pattern common to all three journals: books assessed favorably, followed by those considered outstanding, comprised the overwhelming majority of titles; unfavorably assessed books constituted a distinct minority.

Certain contrasting reviewing patterns also emerged from the data. *JAH* reviewers were least likely to characterize books as outstanding (12% of titles, as opposed to 18% in *Choice* and 20% in *AHR*). Moderately unfavorable (overall opinion = 2) reviews showed up 5 percent of the time

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in *Choice*, 12 percent of the time in *JAH*, and 17 percent of the time in *AHR*. When percentages of highly unfavorable and moderately unfavorable reviews (overall opinions = 1 and 2) are combined, a noticeable difference emerges. Although these reviews comprise only 10 percent of *Choice* reviews, they account for 21 and 20 percent of *AHR* and *JAH* reviews, respectively. Thus, it appears that books are less likely to be reviewed negatively in *Choice* than in the two history journals. On the other hand, *Choice* reviewers were slightly more likely to equivocate or merely summarize a book's contents (overall opinion = 3) than were *AHR* reviewers (9% as opposed to 2%, respectively).

The highest mean for overall opinion, calculated on a scale of 1 (lowest) to 5 (highest), was found in *Choice* (3.84). The

TABLE 1
Degree of Consensus for Books Deemed Outstanding

Number of books deemed outstanding	Number and percentage of these outstanding books . . .					
	also deemed outstanding in:			deemed outstanding or favorably assessed by:		
	both of the other two journals	at least one of the other two journals	neither of the other two journals	<i>CHOICE</i>	<i>JAH</i>	<i>AHR</i>
<i>CHOICE</i> 28	4* (14%)	8 (29%)	20 (71%)	X	23 (82%)	23 (82%)
<i>JAH</i> 19	4* (21%)	11 (58%)	8 (42%)	15 (79%)	X	17 (89%)
<i>AHR</i> 31	4* (13%)	13 (42%)	18 (58%)	27 (87%)	26 (84%)	X

*Only 4 titles were deemed outstanding in all three journals.

lowest mean was found in *JAH* (3.60), whereas the mean for *AHR* (3.73) lay between those of the other journals.

Statistical analysis found no significant difference in the mean for *Choice* as compared to *AHR*, nor was there any significant difference in the mean for *AHR* as compared to *JAH*. However, there was a statistically significant difference beyond the .05 level in the mean overall opinion for *Choice* when compared to *JAH* ($p = .034$).

Are the same titles reviewed similarly in all three journals?

As demonstrated above, similar percentages of books were given favorable or outstanding overall evaluations by all three journals. Of the 153 titles, sixty received an outstanding evaluation in at least one of the three journals. The data were examined further to determine if the same titles received similar overall evaluations in all three journals.

Table 1 indicates the degree of consensus among the three journals for books deemed outstanding (overall opinion = 5).

Choice reviewers considered twenty-eight titles (of the original 153) to be outstanding. Of the twenty-eight, only four (14%) were also identified as outstanding in both *AHR* and *JAH*. A total of merely eight (29%) of the outstanding titles from *Choice* received the same rating in one of the other two journals. It follows, surpris-

ingly, that twenty of the twenty-eight titles (71%) considered outstanding in *Choice* did not receive the same high rating in either *JAH* or *AHR*.

JAH identified nineteen titles as outstanding. Only four (21%) received the same assessment in both *Choice* and *AHR*. Of the nineteen titles, a total of eleven (58%) were awarded an outstanding evaluation in at least one of the other two journals; the remaining eight outstanding titles (42%) were not granted an outstanding ranking in either *Choice* or *AHR*.

Of the thirty-one books *AHR* identified as outstanding, merely four (13%) were also considered outstanding by reviewers in both *Choice* and *JAH*. A total of thirteen (42%) of the outstanding titles from *AHR* received the same rating in one of the other two journals. Correspondingly, eighteen (58%) of the thirty-one titles received a lower rating in both *Choice* and *JAH*. Clearly, the designation of books as outstanding is not unanimous when reviews published in the three journals are compared.

However, this lack of unanimity in identifying titles as outstanding does not necessarily mean that reviewer opinions were dramatically opposed to each other. Most of the books deemed outstanding in one of the journals were very likely to be either deemed outstanding or favorably assessed in the others (overall opinion = 5 or 4).

TABLE 2
Degree of Consensus for Books That Were Deemed
Outstanding or Assessed Favorably

Number of books deemed outstanding or favorably assessed	Number and percentage of those books deemed outstanding or assessed favorably that were also deemed outstanding or assessed favorably by:		
	<i>CHOICE</i>	<i>JAH</i>	<i>AHR</i>
<i>CHOICE</i> 124	X	88 (71%)	101 (81%)
<i>JAH</i> 113	89 (79%)	X	92 (81%)
<i>AHR</i> 118	101 (86%)	92 (78%)	X

For example, of the twenty-eight titles considered outstanding in *Choice*, twenty-three (82%) were deemed outstanding or favorably assessed in both *JAH* and *AHR*. Among the nineteen books awarded an outstanding evaluation in *JAH*, fifteen from *Choice* (79%) and seventeen from *AHR* (89%) were categorized as outstanding or favorably assessed. Of the thirty-one titles identified as outstanding in *AHR*, twenty-seven from *Choice* (87%) and twenty-six from *JAH* (84%) were categorized as outstanding or favorably assessed.

These data indicate the absence of a common definition by reviewers of what constitutes an outstanding American history book. Evidently, what reviewers consider outstanding scholarship is highly subjective and not universally understood. Apparently, if one reviewer believes a book is outstanding, it is improbable that another reviewer will concur. On the other hand, it is extremely likely that if a book has been called outstanding in one of the journals, it will be called either outstanding or favorably assessed in each of the remaining two journals in an overwhelming majority of cases (79 to 89%).

Table 2 indicates the degree of reviewer consensus among titles that were either deemed outstanding or favorably assessed in all three journals (overall opinion = 5 or 4).

Choice reviewers considered a total of 124 books to be either outstanding or favorably assessed. Of these titles, eighty-eight (71%) and 101 (81%) were similarly

evaluated in *JAH* and *AHR*, respectively. *JAH* reviewers considered a total of 113 books to be outstanding or favorably assessed. Eighty-nine (79%) *Choice* reviewers and ninety-two (81%) *AHR* reviewers concurred with the *JAH* assessments. Of the 118 books *AHR* reviewers labeled outstanding or assessed favorably, *Choice* reviewers had the same opinion of 101 (86%) and *JAH* reviewers of ninety-two (78%). In view of this, a book selector who encounters a favorable or outstanding assessment of a book in *Choice*, *JAH*, or *AHR* can be fairly confident that it will receive a favorable or outstanding assessment in the other two journals.

However, despite this degree of reviewer consensus on titles considered outstanding or favorably assessed, a significant minority of books did not fall into either of these categories. Indeed, reviewer opinions at times were diametrically opposed. For example, 29 percent of the books identified by *Choice* as outstanding or favorably assessed were not deemed likewise by *JAH*. The highest degree of consensus was found between *AHR* and *Choice*. In this case, only 14 percent of the 118 titles deemed outstanding or favorably assessed by *AHR* were not evaluated similarly in *Choice*.

Table 3 indicates the degree of consensus for books assessed highly unfavorable or moderately unfavorable (overall opinion = 1 or 2).

Choice reviewers assessed only fifteen titles in highly unfavorable or moderately

TABLE 3
Degree of Consensus for Books Assessed Highly Unfavorable
or Moderately Unfavorable

Number of books assessed highly unfavorable or moderately unfavorable	Number and percentage of those books assessed highly unfavorable or moderately unfavorable by:		
	<i>CHOICE</i>	<i>JAH</i>	<i>AHR</i>
<i>CHOICE</i> 15	X	3 (20%)	5 (33%)
<i>JAH</i> 30	3 (10%)	X	13 (43%)
<i>AHR</i> 32	5 (16%)	13 (41%)	X

unfavorable terms. Of these, *JAH* reviewers had similar opinions of merely three (20%) and *AHR* reviewers of merely five (33%). *JAH* reviewers gave highly or moderately unfavorable evaluations to thirty books, among which *Choice* reviewers concurred in only three cases (10%) and *AHR* reviewers in thirteen (43%). Of the thirty-two books *AHR* reviewers described in highly or moderately unfavorable terms, just five (16%) and thirteen (41%) were similarly described in *Choice* and *JAH*, respectively.

None of the 153 titles was reviewed in highly unfavorable terms by all three journals. Moreover, only three titles received either a highly unfavorable or moderately unfavorable evaluation in all three journals. The remaining 150 titles all received at least one favorable or outstanding evaluation.

Only three titles received either a highly unfavorable or moderately unfavorable evaluation in all three journals.

Thus, just as a lack of consensus has emerged among reviewers on what characterizes an outstanding book in American history, a similar lack of consensus was evident on titles that received either highly unfavorable or moderately unfavorable evaluations. This lack of

consensus for poor and mediocre works contrasts with the aforementioned large degree of consensus on titles considered to be outstanding or favorably assessed.

Which of the seven evaluative elements are book selectors most likely to encounter in reviews in each of the three journals?

All three journals referred to quality of analysis more frequently than any of the other criteria (see figure 2). *AHR* reviewers mentioned analysis in 80 percent of the reviews, followed by *JAH* with 67 percent and *Choice* with 62 percent.

Unity of thesis was the second most frequently mentioned element in *AHR* and in *JAH*, appearing in 67 and 62 percent of the reviews, respectively. In striking contrast, *Choice* reviewers commented about unity of thesis in only 17 percent of the examined reviews, making it sixth in order of ranking (see table 4).

Quality of research was the third most likely element to appear in reviews in both of the history journals. References were found in 54 percent of *AHR* reviews and in 57 percent of *JAH* reviews. At 61 percent of the total (slightly higher than the percentages for the history journals), it was the second most likely element to appear in *Choice* reviews. Although *Choice* reviews are briefer than those in *AHR* and *JAH*, a book selector will be equally likely to

FIGURE 2
Number and Percentage of 153 Book Reviews in Which Evaluative Elements Were Found

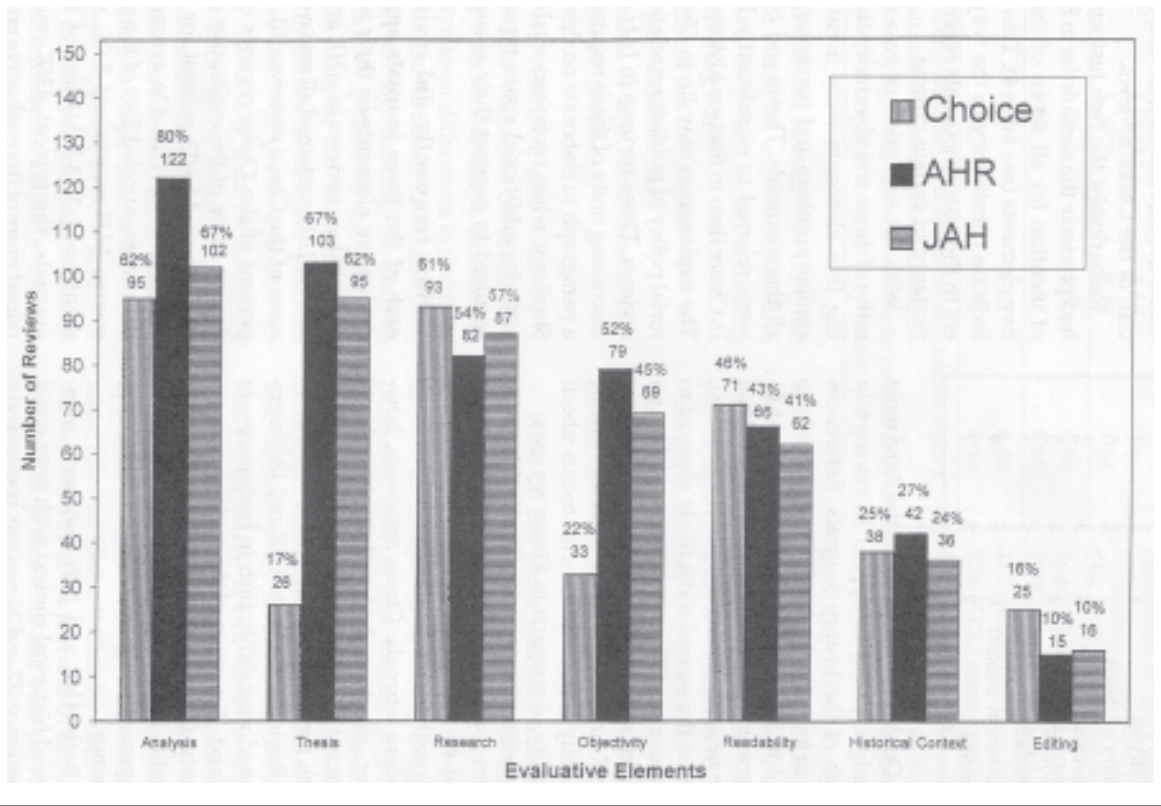


TABLE 4
Comparative Ranking for Mention
of the Evaluative Elements

	<i>AHR</i>	<i>JAH</i>	<i>CHOICE</i>
Analysis	1	1	1
Unity of thesis	2	2	6
Research	3	3	2
Objectivity	4	4	5
Readability	5	5	3
Historical context	6	6	4
Editing	7	7	7

find comments about quality of research in *Choice* reviews.

References to an author's objectivity were found in 52 percent of *AHR* reviews and 45 percent of *JAH* reviews, making it fourth in ranking of mention for both history journals. *Choice* reviewers, however, mentioned objectivity in only 22 percent of their reviews; hence, it ranks fifth for this journal.

Reviewers in both *AHR* and *JAH* mentioned readability fifth in frequency—in 43 and 41 percent of the reviews, respectively. *Choice* reviewers referred to this quality in a similar percentage of reviews, 46 percent, making it third in order of frequency.

Both *AHR* and *JAH* reviewers mentioned historical context with near-equal frequency, 27 and 24 percent, respectively, ranking it sixth. This element appeared in a similar percentage of *Choice* reviews, 25 percent, but was fourth in frequency of mention.

All three journals referred to quality of editing less frequently than to any of the other criteria. Reviewers in the two history journals deemed it even less important than did *Choice* reviewers, as it appeared in only 10 percent of the reviews in *AHR* and in *JAH*, and in 16 percent of the *Choice* reviews.

Remarkably, the two history journals had precisely the same order in frequency of mention for all seven of the evaluative elements (see table 4). This seems to indi-

cate consistency in the way reviewers in the history journals regard the importance of certain criteria.

With the exception of two elements, unity of thesis and objectivity, the remaining five elements were mentioned in similar numbers and percentages across all three journals. Thesis and objectivity were referred to significantly less often in *Choice* than in the two history journals. The explanation may lie in *Choice*'s editorial policy of publishing relatively brief reviews. Those reviews in *JAH* and *AHR* discussing unity of thesis required at least a paragraph to elaborate on this element. Similarly, when reviewers evaluated objectivity, additional space typically was required to support their assessments.

How frequently did reviewers in each of the three journals apply these evaluative elements in their reviews?

Only two reviews in *AHR* and one review in *JAH* contained all seven elements; none of the *Choice* reviews did. Eighteen percent of the *Choice* reviews contained four or more of the evaluative elements, as compared to 33 percent for *JAH* and 41 percent for *AHR*. On average, *Choice* reviews mentioned 2.49 of the seven elements, *JAH* mentioned 3.05, and *AHR* mentioned 3.33.³⁰ Hence, of the three journals, the typical *AHR* review contained more of the evaluative criteria than either *JAH* or *Choice*.

Are the evaluative elements of analysis, research, and readability employed similarly in all three journals?

In addition to noting whether the evaluative elements were mentioned in the reviews, they were coded according to the following scale:

- 0 = element not mentioned
- 1 = negative comments
- 3 = neutral or equivocal comments
- 5 = positive comments

Analysis, research, and readability were the only elements mentioned in suf-

TABLE 5
**Comparative Mean Ratings for Analysis,
Research, and Readability***

	Analysis	Research	Readability
<i>CHOICE</i>	3.78**	4.66	4.61
<i>AHR</i>	3.20**	4.28	4.56
<i>CHOICE</i>	3.74	4.30	4.45
<i>JAH</i>	3.62	4.23	4.66
<i>AHR</i>	3.49	4.02	4.35
<i>JAH</i>	3.45	3.98	4.46

* Mean ratings are based on reviews of the same titles in which a particular evaluative element was mentioned.

** A statistically significant difference exists in the mean for analysis in *Choice* as compared to the mean for analysis in *AHR*

ficient numbers to allow determination of significant differences in reviewer usage patterns. As table 5 indicates, *AHR* reviewers were significantly less likely to praise a book's quality of analysis than were reviewers of the same titles in *Choice*. Reviewers in all three journals were more likely to praise a book's research or readability than its quality of analysis. Moreover, when reviewers chose to comment on a book's quality of research or readability, their remarks were positive in 75 percent of the cases. Hence, there appears to be a reviewer tendency in all three journals to praise rather than criticize an author's research or readability.

To what degree did reviewers apply the evaluative elements to praise, equivocate, or criticize?

Of a total of 381 references to the evaluative elements in *Choice* reviews, 216 (57%) were positive, 122 (32%) neutral or equivocal, and 43 (11%) negative. Of 509 references to the evaluative elements in *AHR*, 258 (51%) were positive, 164 (32%) neutral, and 87 (17%) negative. As to the 467 references in *JAH*, 238 (51%) were positive, 150 (32%) neutral, and 79 (17%) negative. In light of these data, it appears that *Choice* reviewers made the lowest percentage of negative comments and the highest percentage of positive comments.

However, they made precisely the same percentage of neutral comments as reviewers in the two history journals. The distributions of negative, neutral, and positive comments in *AHR* and *JAH* were identical.

How do the three journals compare with regard to the timeliness of their assessments?

The time lag for publication of reviews in *JAH* as compared to *Choice*

ranged from one case of one month prior to *Choice* to one case of thirty months later than *Choice*. For *AHR*, the publication time span varied from one instance of five months prior to *Choice* to one instance of thirty-seven months after *Choice*. On average, *JAH* reviews appeared 8.5 months after reviews of the same titles in *Choice*, and *AHR* reviews appeared 10.6 months after reviews of the same titles in *Choice*.³¹ Clearly, *Choice* is the most timely of the journals in its publication of reviews; of the two history journals, *JAH* is slightly more timely than *AHR*.

Conclusions

This study compared the qualitative assessments provided by reviews published in *American Historical Review*, *Journal of American History*, and *Choice*. One hundred fifty-three books in American history were selected on the basis of being reviewed in all three journals. The contents of the 459 reviews were then analyzed, and the analysis revealed the overall opinion expressed in each review, as well as the extent of reviewer use of seven evaluative elements. Striking similarities, as well as differences, were identified as characteristic of typical reviews appearing in the three journals.

With regard to similarities, it was observed that the preponderance of praised

titles in all three journals make each journal a valuable source for a wide array of recommended books. However, only a fraction of those titles were identified as outstanding, which suggests a certain selectivity among reviewers. Book selectors may confidently assume that if one of these journals praises a book (awarding it either a favorable or outstanding evaluation), the others will do likewise. Moreover, the overwhelming majority of reviews provide book selectors with clearly discernable overall assessments.

The overwhelming majority of reviews provide book selectors with clearly discernable overall assessments.

If frequency of mention reflects the importance of each of the evaluative criteria, clearly quality of analysis is most important for reviewers in these three journals. Conversely, because quality of editing was the least-mentioned evaluative element, it appears to be the reviewers' least important assessment tool. Two additional features may be discerned. First, selectors will find quality of research mentioned an almost-equal number of times in reviews in each of the three journals. Likewise, readability is mentioned in similar numbers regardless of the journal; the same holds true for historical context. Second, selectors are more likely to find titles praised by all three journals for their research or readability more than for their quality of analysis.

Finally, the data indicate that reviewers in all three journals were more likely to praise books for their overall quality than to praise the quality of individual characteristics. Consequently, book selectors should not expect positively reviewed titles to be praiseworthy in every respect.

With regard to dissimilarities, it was noted that reviewers of the same books rarely agreed on outstanding titles, indicating that selectors should not assume any title will commonly receive an outstanding evaluation in all three journals. This lack of unanimity suggests the highly subjective nature of what different individuals will consider "outstanding." Likewise, the total absence of reviewer unanimity in identifying inferior titles (overall opinion = 1 or 2) demonstrates how subjective the negative assessments also can be and warns book selectors not to expect to find negative reviews of the same title in all three journals. For the most part, *AHR* reviewers were most likely to label a book "outstanding," whereas *JAH* reviewers were least likely to do so. *Choice* reviewers tended to give fewer negative reviews than either *AHR* or *JAH* reviewers did; fewer evaluative elements appeared in *Choice* than in either of the other two journals.

With regard to dissimilarities in assessing individual evaluative criteria, book selectors should know that *AHR* reviewers considered quality of analysis more often than did reviewers in the other journals, and were more likely to criticize books for poor quality of analysis. Book selectors also will find significantly fewer references to unity of thesis and objectivity in *Choice* reviews than in reviews appearing in either of the other journals.

The data also point out that because *Choice* reviews appear, on average, 8.5 to 10.6 months sooner than those in *JAH* or *AHR*, respectively, *Choice* reviews enable book selectors to make timelier decisions.

Awareness of variables in reviewing journals should enable book selectors to make better-informed acquisition decisions for their respective institutions. Hopefully, the findings of this study will facilitate that process.³²

 Notes

1. An overview of the literature prior to 1989 may be found in Virgil Blake, "The Role of Reviews and Reviewing Media in the Selection Process: An Examination of the Research Record," *Collection Management* 11, no. 1/2 (1989): 1-40. For more recent studies, see Dana Watson, "Reviewing: A Strategic Service," in *A Service Profession, A Service Commitment: A Festschrift in Honor of Charles D. Patterson*, eds. Connie Van Fleet and Danny P. Wallace (Metuchen, N.J.: Scarecrow Pr., 1992), 19-41; Judith Serebnick, "Selection and Holdings of Small Publishers' Books in OCLC Libraries: A Study of the Influence of Reviews, Publishers, and Vendors," *Library Quarterly* 62, no. 3 (July 1992): 259-94.
2. For example, Serebnick has maintained that research should examine how well reviews perform their role, in "Selection and Holdings," 291. Daniel Ream has argued that objective evaluation of book review journals has been relatively neglected in "An Evaluation of Four Book Review Journals," *Research Quarterly* 19 (winter 1979): 149.
3. Terry Bilhartz, "In 500 Words or Less: Academic Book Reviewing in American History," *History Teacher* 17, no. 4 (Aug. 1984): 526-36.
4. James Benjamin Casey, "Assessment of Quality in Book Selection: An Evaluation of the Effectiveness of Opinions Rendered by Peer Reviews in American History Journals" (Ph.D. diss., Case Western Reserve University, May 22, 1985): 24.
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27. Budd, Thorp, and Donohew, *Content Analysis of Communications*, 6.

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29. A similar system of rating was used by Bilhartz, "In 500 Words or Less." As a basis for their study, Greene and Spornick used the rating system that appears in *Periodical Abstracts on Disc*, Research II Edition [computer database] (Ann Arbor, Mich.: UMI, 1994). Robert J. Greene and Charles D. Spornick, "Favorable and Unfavorable Book Reviews: A Quantitative Study," *Journal of Academic Librarianship* 21, no. 6 (Nov. 1995): 449–53.

30. The average number of evaluative elements for each of the journals is the quotient of the total number of evaluative elements and the number of reviews.

$$\text{Choice } 381/153 = 2.49$$

$$\text{JAH } 467/153 = 3.05$$

$$\text{AHR } 509/153 = 3.33$$

31. Ream calculated the mean time lag of *Choice* reviews to be about four months (127.7 days) after a book was published. Based on Ream's calculation, *JAH* reviews appear, on average, 12.5 months after a book is published, whereas *AHR* reviews appear approximately 14.6 months after a book is published.

32. Data are on file. Inquiries may be addressed to either of the authors.