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Advice on How to Write a Review by Three New York Times Critics

Neil Genzlinger, Television Critic

A lot of people think a review is simply watching a movie, playing a video game, reading a book or whatever and then saying whether you liked it. And that is all that a lot of reviewers do.

But to me, a review like that is useful only to readers who have the exact same tastes and interests as the person writing it. That's why I always try to keep two things in mind when I'm reviewing: One, who am I writing this for? And two, who is the movie, video game, etc. that I'm reviewing made for?

Let's start with the first point, because it really shapes the way you try to experience the thing you're reviewing and the way you write about it. Say you're reviewing a movie. Are you writing your review for a newspaper like The Times, which circulates to a vast, general audience — that is, it's read by a broad cross-section of people? Or are you writing your review for a film journal or magazine, which is read primarily by people who see lots and lots of movies and know a lot about how films are made, the history of movies and so on?

If you're writing for a general audience, keep in mind that most people see maybe six movies a year in a theater and that they aren't experts on the terminology of filmmaking. They won't know what movie terms like "anamorphic" and "locked-down shot" mean. And there's a low probability that they will have seen all of the movies that you (since you're a film reviewer) have seen, so if you compare the film you're reviewing with six others you're familiar with, they'll be lost. But if you're writing for a film magazine, the opposite of all those things is true. Readers of those magazines know all the filmmaking jargon, and they might see 100 movies a year. The same principles hold true for a review of something like a video game. Are you writing the review for a general audience, or for hard-core gamers?

Just as important, a good review takes into account who the target audience for the product is. If you're a 15-year-old guy and a hard-core gamer but you're reviewing a video game made for 9-year-old girls, well, of course you're not going to like the game. In fact, you'll probably be tempted to make fun of it. But that's not your job. Your job is to figure out whether a 9-year-old girl would like the game, and if so to say why, and if not to say why not.

This is where reviewing gets difficult, because you may have to do some homework in order to approach the game as a 9-year-old girl would. Is the game play easy enough for a kid that age, but hard enough that it will be challenging for her? Is the story likely to be

interesting to a 9-year-old girl? What other games are popular with 9-year-old girls, and is the one you're reviewing different from and better than those games, or is it just ripping them off?

I take the same approach when I review a movie, a TV show, a play or a book. The review isn't really about whether I liked the thing at all. It's about whether the people it's intended for would like it.

Jon Pareles, Popular Music Critic

Reviews are where an experience meets ideas. You go to a concert, a movie, an art exhibition, a restaurant, and it makes you think. Maybe the experience is a catalyst for a brand-new idea; maybe it crystallizes something you've been thinking about for a while. It becomes something worth writing about.

The job of the reviewer is to get both the experience and the ideas into words — and into proportion. In some ways, a review is the same as reporting: The facts have to be correct and presented in a coherent way. And in some ways, a review is very different from reporting: Your subjective experience and your reactions — intellectual, emotional, visceral — are a big part of it.

The best criticism merges the details of the individual experience — the close-up — with a much broader picture of what the experience means. It's not just about that concert or art exhibit. It's about how to listen or how to look. It's about changing the perception your readers will bring to the next experience because your ideas awakened theirs.

Yes, that's a tall order. You need to select your details. You need to make sure your ideas are clearly expressed. You need the writing itself to be engaging, to be worth that reader's attention. It can be serious, a little poetic, even funny — whatever communicates the ideas.

You'll probably do best if you write about something that leaves you with a strong opinion, positive or negative. (It's always illuminating, and part of a critic's education, to experience something you hate but a lot of people love. Figure out how it works and what it does for its fans, and feel free to explain why you still hate it.)

A review is not about the reviewer. As a reader, I don't care about when you got there or your mood or the weather that day. It's about what you experienced when you met the work head-on with full attention: what your knowledge tells you about the work, what





your immediate experience added to that and where the work can lead next. You might be writing about something your readers don't know about but you've discovered; help them share that sense of discovery. Or you might be bringing a new perspective to something familiar. Make it convincing. It's about feeling, learning, thinking, judging. And making all that vivid to your reader.

Maria Russo, Children's Book Editor

When I review a book, I think of it as something that has been entrusted to me. I am taking on a responsibility. But the responsibility goes in two directions. First, you have to be sure to do right by the author — that is, to show that you understand the book on the terms the author intended it. You have to get the facts right, as in all journalism. I always keep in mind how hard an author works to finish a book, and I try to respect that work.

But the second — and probably the paramount — responsibility is to my own readers, the people reading my review to figure out whether they should spend their money and valuable time on a book. I would never want to recommend something that I think would be a waste of someone's time, or even just an "eh" way to spend time, when there are tons of great books out there for every taste.

When I read a book that I'm going to be reviewing, I pay close attention to my own instincts. How does it make me feel? Am I finding myself reluctant to put it down? Or is it giving me nagging, bad feelings in my stomach? When I sit down to write the review, what I'm ultimately trying to do is document my reaction. That's I guess what makes a review feel "honest."

The first job when writing a review is to make it clear, probably in the first few paragraphs, that you know what the book is about and what the author is trying to do. That means making clear whether this book is, say, fantasy or taking place in the real world, who the characters are, what the basic plot is.

Still, you don't want to give away the entire plot. This is a big rule of reviewing. It's true for movies and TV, but especially for books. People get really angry about spoilers. What you have to do is describe the basic plot structure, the challenge or predicament the characters are in. Then you want to talk about how they are going to solve their problem without being too specific, because that would be a spoiler. You can say what they learn and how they changed; you just can't say exactly what happens to them.

The second task — and privilege — you have, is to convey your opinion. It used to be that you never ever, or very rarely, used "I" in a review. I didn't like this, or this isn't my favorite





part of the book. But that has changed, and so the challenge for a reviewer is not to use too many I's, because that can weaken the review. Make sure you have some statements in there that, even if they're your opinion, you can state them in a direct way, without saying "I think." You can say, for instance, "This book succeeds in painting a believable picture of middle school life in contemporary America" without saying "I think." You have, after all, been to middle school in America! So you've earned the right to assert that.

The most important difference between a book report and a book review is that when you write a book report for school, it's a book that is already out there. It has an audience and reputation built already — that's why teachers assigned it. But when you're writing a book review, it is always going to be something new — even something that hasn't been published yet. But that also makes it even more of a responsibility. You can't do any damage to a book when you're writing a school report, but a new book is still building an audience. People are still figuring out: Is this a good book? Is this an important book? You have to be fair to this book, but it's also a privilege to influence the reputation of a book and its life in the world.

The final thing I would say is that in a book review, as far as I can tell, teachers often give a lot of rules about stuff like transition sentences and topic sentences. The writing can be really cut and dried that way. When you're writing a review, you should think of it as a literary form. Literary criticism is an old and storied literary genre in itself. You should feel that you can be creative. You can make your sentences start with unexpected words. You can make short paragraphs. You can create lists in there if you want. You can really play around with the form, in a way that your teachers sometimes don't let you, but you should feel free to do because writing a book review is purely about the pleasure and excitement of reading. You don't have to prove anything to your teacher, you just have to express your own passions, opinions and perceptions.



