

# Review, what is it

Specialties · By Simon Townsend · 21 min read

---

What is a review?

## By SIMON TOWNSEND

What makes a good review? What is a badly conceived review? And anyway, what IS a review?

That's a bit like asking how long is a piece of string, what color is it and what's it made of? I invented, produced and fronted a review program on ABC-TV in the early 90s. It was called TVTV and aired at 6.30pm for half-an-hour, Monday to Thursday.

My panelists and I reviewed television programs from around the world. I tried to write a long set of notes to myself and to my reviewers about what constituted a review. This was incredibly hard to define. If you read reviews of movies, new cars, TV programs, books, art, theatre and restaurants, you find that a review can be almost anything.

Sometimes you read a review of a book about, say, the history of the Australian Labor Party. You get to the end of the review and almost nothing has been written about the book, but the reviewer has let you know his full opinion of the Labor Party. Is that a review?

Sometimes you read a review of a movie you've already seen, and you wonder if the reviewer saw the same movie. The reviewer's observations and opinions seem to be about some OTHER movie. Is that a review?

Sometimes you read a review of a restaurant in which the reviewer believes the place to be vile and horrible and rates it 1-out-of-20, and yet it's been in business 20 years. It can't be that bad! The reviewer is being stupidly critical. Is that a review?

I'm blown if I can come up with a definition of a review. But seeing I've written hundreds of reviews, and I've been the subject of TV reviewers, and I've read thousands of reviews, let me attempt some kind of explanation of what makes a review.

Undoubtedly the best review is the one you agree with. But that doesn't help you write a review. Here's some thoughts.

(1.) Readers prefer strong opinions. The best reviews contain passion and a definite point-of-view. Readers also want some insight, something they hadn't thought of, something that hasn't been mentioned elsewhere. What do I mean by insight? I can't define it, but you'll know it when you read it (or write it).

(2.) No review is required (legally or morally) to be "fair and reasonable" since no-one has a clearcut definition of what's fair and reasonable. What's fair and reasonable to me is whatever I personally agree with. What's fair and reasonable to an actor is whatever praises and admires him/her. A reviewer is not required to

be "without bias" as we are all biased (we all have attitudes and belief systems). But a reviewer is (legally and morally) required to be "without malice". That is, you can't pour scathing criticism on some actor out of personal revenge because he/she has, say, spurned your romantic advances, or, you hate his/her religious beliefs.

(3.) You must be accurate, or your editor will distrust you. Get every tiny detail correct. Or other journalists who want your gig will say to your editor: "What would he/she know about the subject? He/she can't even be accurate about [[spellings, dates, prices, facts, etc]]."

(4.) You must be knowledgeable, because review gigs go only to those who know their topic (or appear to) and don't make dumb mistakes mentioned in (3.). If you review wine, you'd better know your grapes. If you review fashion, you must never misspell Armani or Versace. And so on.

(5.) Nothing (NOTHING!) is perfect. There is no perfect movie, no perfect holiday, no perfect TV program and no perfect new product. No one wants to read a review that reads like an over-the-top public relations release. A reviewer is under an obligation to point out shortcomings, even those of a 19-out-of-20 restaurant. (No restaurant ever scores 20-out-of-20.)

(6.) How do you become a reviewer? Well, first you must write a collection of reviews. That starts with writing your FIRST one. Just do it. Write a review now, today, say 500 words maximum. Make it a review of something you have experienced recently. A play, a product, a movie, a new motorbike, whatever. First, go out and buy some publications that contain reviews and read them all, noting what makes these reviews worth reading. You can look up reviews on the internet too. Then sit down and write your own review. Keep on writing reviews, and importantly, keep on READING them to become familiar with the many different ways of doing reviews.

## **How To Write A Movie Review**

### **By Pamela Garza**

Constructing the ideal review first involves having the right voice, knowing your audience, and knowing your subject. Let's examine these one at a time.

A. The right voice. This is the tone you set during construction, and it depends on the type of movie you are reviewing. Tackling a kids' movie will have a particular voice because of the ages involved. The spine tingler uses words conducive to the thriller atmosphere. A comedy like "Three Fugitives" cannot be shown in the same language-light as the Shakespearean tragedy Macbeth.

B. Know your audience. Since a review should sound like you're talking to your audience, you have to know who they are. A magazine that caters to 8 year old kids couldn't publish a review that refers to Han Solo as having "a rogue personality", but a teen magazine might. Therefore, when writing for a particular publication, find out the kind of audience that reads its pages, and a way to identify with them.

C. Know your subject. To construct a brilliant review, you must have the right building materials. The more you know about movie companies, directors, actors, actresses, movies, videos, and where they came from, the more authoritative punch you'll add to your piece. You can achieve this in a number of ways.

1. Keep an Info Journal. Whenever you hear of a new tidbit coming out about a celebrity, write it down. Don't rely on your memory.
2. Watch shows as 'Access Hollywood' or 'Entertainment Tonight' with your Journal close by. Follow up with a dose of celeb magazines, such as 'People' or 'Entertainment Weekly'.
3. Purchase and have on hand a volume of movie trivia, such as 'VideoHound's Golden Movie Retriever'.

By using excerpts from my review for DISORGANIZED CRIME, we can dissect the mechanics of a movie/video review.

A. Start out with the basic information about the movie:

1. TITLE (Disorganized Crime)
2. THE CAST OF STARS (Starring Fred Gwynne, Ruben Blades, Lou Diamond Phillips, and Corbin Bernsen)
3. THE DIRECTOR (Jim Kouf)
4. RATING (R-for language and anti-hero premise)
5. THE YEAR of its release/year it came to video (1989)
6. WHO PUT THE MOVIE OUT (Touchstone Pictures)
7. RUNNING TIME (101 minutes long )

B. With your opening remarks you will set the flavor of the review.

"This reviewer loves it when a cast ensemble is formed because of the chemistry among its players, and not to meet some minority, feminist, or social agenda. The cast assembled here hands in a collective performance to be proud of, and there's not a ham in the bunch."

Within the confines of this introductory paragraph, you get the impression that you'll find a favorable review addressed to the thinking adult.

C. Give a brief synopsis of the movie plot, using strategically placed comparisons, a dusting of adjectives, and perhaps a quote from the movie.

"Corbin Bernsen plays Frank Salezar, who summons four other crooks to a small, Montana town to rob a bank. As the four anti-heros convene, things start to go comically wrong.

First, Frank is picked up by two New Jersey cops, played in the perfect, big-city hyper mode by Ed O'Neill and Daniel Roebuck. When Frank escapes, the cops have to make the best of the 'snot-nose situation', by calling on the locals for help.

Meanwhile, the four pros gather in a house in the Montana woods. Between the arguments, police chases, and court appearances, they try to find out why Frank called them in."

Two or three concise paragraphs should do, depending on the word count allowed by the publication you are writing for.

D. Elaborate on the performances and the actor's characters.

"Fred Gwynne is so good as Max Green, as the cigarette-smoking, wheezing explosive and alarms expert, that you wonder how he ever got typecast as Herman Munster.

"Ruben Blades, who plays Carlos Barrios, the muscle of the group, provides belly-laugh humor with his mocking sarcasm, hot temper, determination, and Cuban accent."

This section of the review could give you a fine opportunity to refer to trivia. Notice the reference to a previous character of Fred Gwynne's.

E. The mop-up paragraphs should include your opinion and recommendation. Here's a sampling:

"The chemistry within this cast is a bold serving of perfection. The direction is wisely kept low key so that the stars are allowed to do what they do best, and the story can be told without confusion. With a twist for an ending, you'll watch the credits with a smile, for sure."

Usually, it's not a good idea to expose the ending of a movie in your review.

F. Complete the review with a rating system and its explanation. Use the publication's system, or you can use your own creativity to come up with one. Ebert uses thumbs, KIDS' HIGHWAY uses cameras, VideoHound's Golden Movie Retriever uses dog bones. Make sure your rating explanation is clear.

G. Depending on the word count specified in the guidelines, you can add more trivia about the actors or what happened during the filming of the movie.

"Fred Gwynne starred in the first TV, situation comedy about cops called 'Car 54, Where are You?' It ran from '1961-'63."

While informative, a well-constructed review should have intelligence behind it, an intelligence that can inform, entertain and identify with readers as well.

## **How To (Maybe) See A Movie**

### **Early And Free**

#### **By Simon Townsend**

All my students ask about getting invited to see movies to review.

If you've never published a movie review you won't get invited because the publicists for the movie DISTRIBUTORS don't know you. MOVIE THEATRES don't hold showings for critics. It's the distributors who do.

They are the companies which import the movie, get it classified and physically deliver prints to theatres. Distributors have small, private theatres with about 30 seats. A fulltime projectionist is on standby to roll a movie when the critic turns up.

Important critics for big-circulation publications can trundle in anytime they like. They try to book the lesser critics into a combined showing.

So . . . you have to sweet talk your way in. Be nice, be pleasant. It's no skin off the nose of the publicist to let one more person into a combined showing.

You'll have to convince her you're keen. Show her some of your unpublished, written reviews and explain your target publications. If you say "Who Magazine" she'll dismiss you as an amateur, as "Who" has its own long-established movie critic. Look up the Yellow Pages under "Film & Video Distributors".

The biggies include Dendy and Roadshow. I asked my friend Harvey Shore if he'd comment on the above answer. He emailed me:

### **Dear Simon:**

As a former head of PR for Village Roadshow, I confirm that movie theatres rarely if ever hold screenings for critics. That is the province of distributors, who often maintain their own theatrettes for such previews.

Distributors also maintain their own lists of people who get invited to these previews. The lists are divided into A, B and C.

The A List consists of celebrities, VIPs and the like. The B List comprises major critics and personalities from established media. The C List consists of less important people who could be invited if there was space and time.

There are ALWAYS more people wanting to get onto a list than there are seats available for them.

Thus publicists are ALWAYS very skeptical about people asking for free seats, in the HOPE that they might later write a review that gets published. Experience has shown that this is often just an excuse to see a film for free.

Since there are rarely enough free seats to just give them away, my reply was always: "I'd

love to help you, but I always allocate movie passes to media outlets, rather than to individuals. So if you can get accredited to a media outlet first, then I'll be happy to give you a double pass to the movie second."

Personally Simon, the excuse that "I'm trying to get into writing movie reviews, and so I'd like some free passes to see your movies" is an old excuse, encountered by movie publicists every week.

They get tired of hearing it. They don't respond to it very well. If people are really keen to be reviewers, the best advice is for them to pay to see a movie themselves, and then write a review, and then submit it for publication or broadcast.

If it's good enough, they'll get it published, and maybe get a job in the media -- AND THEN - once accredited, they can approach distributors to get on the reviewer list.

But until then they are, in fact, just joining a long queue of people who endlessly besiege distributors with requests and good excuses to get into movies free.

And distributors have to run a business, so they don't like giving away their asset free to everyone who asks. They'd rather say "Invest your own money first, and get the job you're after. Then come to us, and we'll be happy to help you do your job".

Some distributors may be more sympathetic, and hand out freebies. But very few. There are just too many hands out and too few results. But as you and I know Si, good journalists can always, as you say, sweet-talk their way into anything. - Harvey Shore

"What To Include In A Restaurant Review"

By Justin Smith [jussmith@mail.millikin.edu](mailto:jussmith@mail.millikin.edu)

This sets out the ELEMENTS you should consider including in your restaurant review but does not tell you how to write a restaurant review.

Restaurant reviews are a wonderful way of communicating the quality and type of restaurant available to consumers in various communities.

The pattern that I have noticed amongst various reviews has enabled me to create the following criteria essential to creating a restaurant review.

Criteria: The following outline offers elements that make a "good" restaurant review. Obviously, not all of these elements are applicable to all establishments, and other elements not listed are equally important, but this list provides a general overview for all styles and types of restaurant reviews.

- Name of establishment being reviewed is clearly shown at the top of the page?
- Location of the establishment included near top of page?
- Phone number of the establishment included?
- Title of review is located near the top?
- The name of the author/reviewer is located near the top of the page?
- The credentials of the reviewer should be included somewhere, in the form of a link to their home page or resume?
- The contact address of the author/reviewer is included at the end of the presentation?
- Genre of the establishment included?
- Who the intended consumer of the establishment is included?
- Nationality?
- Type of food (Italian, steak house, family, etc.)?
- Age?
- Gender?
- Etc.?
- Type of town that the establishment is located in is included?
- The distance to the closest town from the establishment is included?

- Other attractions located nearby the establishment are included?
- When the restaurant was first opened?
- Who the owner(s) is/are?
- The menu:
- Userfriendliness?
- The number of items of the menu?
- Appetizers or entrees?
- Drinks?
- Main dishes?
- Clearly composed?
- Comparable in size, price, etc. to other local establishments?
- Size of establishment?
- Number of rooms?
- Available seating?
- Waiting area?
- Separate smoking/nonsmoking seating?
- Toilets?
- Expected length of wait?
- Do you need to make reservations?
- How far in advance should those be made?
- Atmosphere
- Decorations (paintings, plants, etc.)?
- Music?
- Noise level?
- Entertainment (live bands, live alligators, live television, etc.)?
- Hours open?
- Prices?
- Reasonable?
- Comparable to other local establishments?
- Range offered, from low to high?
- Food?
- Variety?
- Type(s) offered?
- Quality (dry, soggy, undercooked, burnt, overall taste, etc.)?
- Quantity (large, small, etc.)?
- Speed prepared?
- Waitresses/Waiters?

- Friendliness?
- Speediness?
- Do they check back with you frequently?
- The proportion of employees to the number of patrons?
- Appropriate dress for this establishment?
- A link offered for the establishment's home page?
- Pictures of establishment?
- An overall rating?
- Final thoughts

Restaurant reviews are an excellent method of communicating information about eating establishments worldwide. They are also a useful way to determine restaurants that appeal to individuals, and aid in the selection of an establishment with which to dine.

Here's a recent report that demonstrates a restaurant reviewer's almost total freedom to write what she or he feels, even if that review shuts down a \$3 million restaurant:

Jury accepts bad taste in food critic's mouth

## **By Michael Pelly, Legal Reporter**

The Sydney Morning Herald (reprinted with kind permission)

It was hardly the review the owners of a new Sydney restaurant expected. It was unfair, they told the Supreme Court this week, to say most of the dishes were "simply unpalatable" or that the flavours "jangled like a car crash". And critic Mathew Evans should not have called Coco Roco, at King Street Wharf, "a bleak spot on the culinary landscape".

Within weeks of the Good Living review on September 30, 2003, the owners - sisters Aleksandra and Liliana Gacic, and Liliana's husband, restaurateur Branislav Ciric - closed the restaurant, which had been fitted out at a cost of \$3 million.

They sued Fairfax, publisher of the Herald, for the cost of the loss of the business but on Thursday a jury of four threw out the defamation claim. The Herald wasn't required to defend the review even on the grounds that it was "fair comment".

The owners argued that almost every observation by Matthew Evans was unfair and false. They said he consumed all the dishes provided "in their entirety" - a claim Evans hotly denied.

He was wrong about "the black reflector tiles in the bathroom". They were "predominantly ceramic with a high-gloss finish". And when Evans had said the loo made him "feel I should be wearing a pink shirt and a leather tie" he had wrongly inferred "that the bathroom was for homosexuals".

On it went.

The restaurant - mains \$28-\$52 - was not expensive. The criticised mustards were "excellent", the pork belly "could not have been dry" and the raspberry and shiraz sorbet was "delicious". They suggested that instead of being unimpressed, Evans had "enjoyed his meals".

The Herald's lawyer, Mark Polden, said the publisher stood behind Evans's expertise and "right to express strongly held views". The court ordered that the plaintiffs pay Fairfax's costs.

## **Book Reviews**

Here's some materials taken from the internet.

Reproduced with permissions.

What is a book review?

### **By Gregg's Services**

A book review is a description and an evaluation of a book that you have read. Book reviews are helpful because they inform future readers about books they may be interested in reading. Often, a book review will influence other readers by telling them a little bit about what the story is about, as well as if it is worth reading or not.

An important duty to remember is that a book reviewer does not give away the ending. If it is a good book, the reader will not want to spend time reading it if he/she already knows the ending.

4 Steps to Follow When Writing a Book Review:

1. Write at least 3-4 sentences about the plot

What was the story about?

Who were the main characters?

What did the main characters do in the story?

Did the main characters run into any problems?

Did the main characters have any adventures?

Who was your favourite character? Why?

1. Your personal experiences

Could you relate to any of the characters in the story?

Have you ever done some of the things or felt some of the same things as the characters?

1. Your opinion

Did you like the book?

What was your favourite part of the book?

Do you have a least favourite part of the book?

If you could change something in the book, what would it be?

If you wish you could change the ending, remember: don't tell the ending.

1. Your recommendation

Would you recommend this book to another person?

What type of person would like this book?

How to Write a Book Review

## By Otto Myer-Smith

A book report summarizes the books contents. A book review is different from a book report. A review should be a critical analysis of the book, not merely an account of its contents or a summary of the "story."

The reviewer should interact with the author by agreeing with the author where that is possible and disagreeing where the reviewer finds the author deficient in knowledge, judgment, organizing skill or writing ability. A reviewer should clearly state how much or little the author has contributed to the reviewer's understanding of the subject in question and recommend or not recommend the book to other potential readers.

The following questions should be kept in mind when writing a review:

1. What exactly is the subject or topic of the book? Does the author cover the subject adequately? Does the author cover all aspects of the subject in a balanced fashion? What is the approach to the subject - topical, analytical, chronological, descriptive?
2. What is the thesis, interpretation or point of view? Is the author biased in favor or in disfavor of the subject written about? Is the thesis clearly stated or did you have to extract from a mass of facts and opinions? Does the professional background of the author (from info on back of book) affect the thesis of the book?
3. What is the nature of the book's content? Is it theoretical or mostly factual? Is the theorizing or fact-building mostly political, economic, social, or cultural in nature? Are the theories or facts organized in such a way as to support the thesis of the book most effectively?
4. What conclusion or conclusions does the author make? Does the conclusion agree with the thesis or stated purposes? Does the conclusion differ from the textbook or other books you have read?
5. How has this book helped you understand the subject you are studying in the course? Would you recommend the book to your reader?

## Mechanical Rules

1. Check for spelling and grammatical errors. Use a dictionary, thesaurus and basic English grammar whenever necessary. If you have grammar and spell-check software, be sure to pay attention to the underlines which the software provides you.

2. Avoid excessive quotation and give a specific page reference in parenthesis when you do quote. Remember, whatever the author says, you can probably say it as well or better in your own words.
3. Word-process or type your final draft with double-spacing and one-inch margins. Carefully proofread what you have typed or word-processed, and make the necessary corrections in the standard way.
4. On the top of the first page, give the name of the author, full title of the book, the publisher and the place and date of publication, followed by the current price of the book.
5. On the bottom of the fourth page, type your name and email address and "END".
6. Remember that your name on the paper indicates that the review is entirely your own work. Any form of plagiarism or intellectual theft will result you being blacklisted by editors.

## **Rodman Philbrick's tips**

Here are a few tips that I've found helpful when I sit down to write about a book.

Before you begin writing, make a few notes about the points you want to get across.

While you're writing, try thinking of your reader as a friend to whom you're telling a story.

Try to mention the name of the author and the book title in the first paragraph - there's nothing more frustrating than reading a review of a great book but not knowing who wrote it and what the title is.

If possible, use one paragraph for each point you want to make about the book. It's a good way to emphasise the importance of the point. You might want to list the main points in your notes before you begin.

Try to get the main theme of the book across in the beginning of your review. Your reader should know right away what he or she is getting into should they choose to read the book.

Think about whether the book is part of a genre. Does the book fit into a type like mystery, adventure, or romance? What aspects of the genre does it use?

What do you like or dislike about the book's writing style? Is it funny? Does it give you a sense of the place it's set? What is the author's/narrator's "voice" like?

Try using a few short quotes from the book to illustrate your points. This is not absolutely necessary, but it's a good way to give your reader a sense of the author's writing style.

Make sure your review explains how you feel about the book and why, not just what the book is about. A good review should express the reviewer's opinion and persuade the reader to share it, to read the book, or to avoid reading it.

Do research about the author and incorporate what you learn into the review. Biographical information can help you formulate your opinion about the book, and gives your review depth. Remember, a book doesn't come directly from a printing press. It's a product of an author's mind, and therefore it may be helpful to know something about the author and how she or he came to write the book. For instance, a little research will reveal the following about author Harper Lee:

To Kill a Mockingbird, which won the Pulitzer Prize, is the only book she ever published. The town she called Maycomb is really Monroeville, Alabama. Many of the residents thought the author had betrayed them by writing the book. Some people think she based the character Dill on Truman Capote, a famous writer who was her childhood friend.

How to write readable book reviews

Prepared for the Mun Libraries Web Team by Suzanne Sexty

You may want to read about book reviewing. For books about writing book reviews, look up BOOK REVIEWING in the subject section at your library. You may also want to read book reviews that other people have written.

Steps to follow: 1 choose the book, 2 read the book and 3 make notes about the book.

Think about the content of the book in an effort to arrive at an appropriate theme for the review.

Organize your notes into an outline which incorporates your theme.

Write the review. Edit and revise the review before recopying it.

What to put in a book review. You should identify the book by giving: the author, the full title, the publisher, the place and date of publication, the edition.

You might use some or all of the following approaches in your review:

- outline the contents of the book
- evaluate and make critical comments on the book
- use quotations or references to the new ideas in the book to illustrate your theme
- identify the author's qualifications, and any other personal information that is relevant to your discussion of the book
- place the book with reference to the author's other writings
- compare the book with a similar work by a contemporary
- point out the author's intentions, including the audience for which the book is intended
- relate the work to a social or literary trend

What to leave out of a book review. Usually a book review does not include:

- footnotes
- a bibliography
- long quotations from the book or other reviews
- information about the author's life that is not related to the theme of the review

Remember: there is no right way to write a book review. Book reviews are highly personal and reflect the opinions of the reviewer. A review can be as short as 50-100 words, or as long as 2,500 words, depending on the purpose of the review. Before writing the review, be sure that you understand what type of review is required for your target publication.

Keep your target readers in mind. This will help define the emphasis you put on various parts of the review.

---

Reprinted from The Wonderful World of Journalism. Written in the spirit of Simon Townsend's journalism craft advice. Visit [simontownsendjournalist.com](http://simontownsendjournalist.com) for the full archive.