

# How to Write a Play Critique

There are certain questions that every critique must answer. The following will assist you in making sure that the most important questions are answered. While it is not always necessary to address each and every item, your critique must be considered and well-thought out.

One major point to remember when writing a critique is that although attending and viewing the play is partially a personal experience, you should avoid being "mean and nasty" in your critique. When you criticize something, do so by providing evidence from the play you saw and the information gained throughout this course. A critique isn't just saying "I hated it" or "It was the best play I ever saw," it is putting your thought down after *carefully considering* all of the elements of the production.

If you have seen plays before, keep in mind these other plays so you have something to compare the new play performance to. These other experiences will help you to be more detailed in your observations. Don't disregard your previous experiences.

Also, remember a review is "what" and a critique is "what and how." You have to write a CRITIQUE. No book reports or summaries!

Remember that a "critic" is one who observes and analyzes theatre with extensive explanation and is highly knowledgeable and sensitive to theatrical art and techniques. You need to think of yourself as a "critic". You are not a "reviewer" who observes and reports on what has occurred in the theatre production or who tells briefly what the theatre event was about for a television or newspaper type of audience. Neither are you a "blogger" who observes and gives your opinions without theatrical knowledge. You must write as a "critic" using the knowledge you have learned in this class to analyze the production performance.

**\*The critique you write should be a minimum of one typed written page, ranging from one to three pages, using the following practices.**

- 1" margins.
- 12 point font (Times New Roman or Arial is preferable)
- Single spacing within paragraphs, double spacing between paragraphs.
- Include a cover page with your name and class
- Title your critique: Critique of *NAME OF PLAY*

**\*You need to use a classic 5-6 section structure.**

**\*Introduction (1 section):**

- Include the title of the play, name of the playwright, the Theater where the play was held, the name of the director, and the date of the performance.
- Two sentence thematic summary of what the play was trying to say.
- Thesis of your critique – your overall impression of the success or failure of the production. (Don't try to comment on everything. Identify the most important elements and stick to those.)

**\*Body of Critique (3-4 sections or 3-4 points):**

- Be sure to deal with all points of your thesis. (Acting, Directing, Costuming, Scenic Design)
- How did the actors handle their roles, actions, dialogue, and other concepts of the play?
- Were there points of confusion within their work/presentation of character?
- How did the use of scenery/costuming help or hurt the production?
- What would you like to have seen done differently with acting/costuming/scenery?
- Remember you must: 1. STATE your criticism (good or bad), 2. SUPPORT your statement with examples/evidence from the performance, and 3. EXPLAIN how the examples/ evidence lead you to make the statement of criticism.

## \*Conclusion (1 Section):

- Don't just recap.
- Did the play have its desired effect?
- Did this production have an effect on how you see theatre and your participation?

## What am I Really Writing About?

What you are really writing about is the *performance* which you saw. You are writing about the work that the actors have done onstage. You are writing about the technical elements of the production. You are writing about the overall success or failure of the performance and what you saw the director trying to point out in his/her interpretation and portrayal of the play.

You are not writing about the story of the play. You are not writing about what the characters do (just what the actors do with the characters they portray). You are not writing about the physical location in which you were seated. You are not writing about the moral of the play. You are not writing about where you enjoyed the story or even agreed with it.

## Not Just "Yuck!" or "Yeah!"

Providence evidence/examples from the play!

You might write the following as an example . . . .

*John Smith, playing the role of John Doe, seems very self-conscious throughout the performance. During the first scene, Smith fidgeted with his shirt cuffs and kept pulling at his jacket. Later in the performance, Smith nearly dropped a cup because his hand was shaking so badly. If the character of John Doe hadn't been described as "the big man on campus," these might have been choices by Smith; however, nervousness made little sense for his character.*

Additionally, you shouldn't "gush and awww" in your critique. If you really like something about the performance, comment on it, but be specific.

You could write something like . . . .

*Jane Doe, playing the role of Alice, was unbelievable, but in all the right ways. Doe made Alice seem as though she was plucked right off the street, not a rehearsed character. Doe moved easily onstage, and seemed to glide instead of walk in the scene where she had to descend the staircase up center stage. Not only did Doe move effortlessly, her line delivery was completely natural. The dialogue in the play used a lot of stiff, awkward vocabulary, but Doe said those words like she uses them every day. For example, the line "Your manner is well beyond me. I have never once entertained an idea to the contrary." Doe made the words flow and seem almost like the lyrics of a song. She gave the audience the distinct impression that she not only understood every word, but also that her character was sincere with each phrase.*

Obviously, these are examples put together for explanation here, but they should give you a sense of how you can be specific while still being critical or complimentary to the production.

## Focus Your Attention:

Focus on the actors, directing choices, scenery, lighting, costumes, sound, props, and the other elements that go together to make the production. These are elements of the performance and not of the "story."

Focus on things that worked either really well or need improvement. Either side of this equation make writing easier; the "okay" stuff is difficult to write about, because, quite honestly, there isn't much to say about it.

Focus on things that could be improved or changed—forget about those that can't be altered. For ease of discussion and clarification's sake, the following elements are *off limits* as they are script-bound items that generally are locked in place and cannot be changed in contemporary pieces.

- The story itself: the script and language used cannot be changed. Because of copyright restrictions, any changes to the script or cuts in dialogue must have the written consent of the playwright—which is many times nearly impossible.
- The number of characters: the number of characters is set by the playwright and cannot be altered. So, don't put in your critique, "*the director should have put at least two more characters in the play,*" because the director cannot do that.
- The number of roles an actor plays: there are quite a few shows in which actors are required to play multiple roles. This sometimes creates confusion for the audience, but generally only if the presentation of the characters is unclear. If the show is written to have 2 actors present 12 characters, then there is a reason for it and it cannot be changed.

(Plays which are in the public domain—no longer subject to copyright laws—are exceptions to these guidelines, but these plays are not widely produced in the Houston area. The Shakespeare plays on the pre-approved list do fall under this category.)

Focus on the overall success or failure of the production, based on what you saw and how you felt about it. Make sure to use examples from the performance to support your assertions.

### **Helpful Hints . . . Hopefully**

- **Take someone with you.** There is nothing more frustrating than watching something and wanting to talk about it and not having anyone with which to do that. So, get a friend or significant other to go the performance with you—it doesn't matter if they know any more about theatre than you do, they just provide a sounding board for your thoughts later. You are going for class, so please go with someone 16 years or older.
- **Don't be afraid to read a synopsis of the play before you go.** (I actually encourage you to read it before you go. Nearly every theater website provides a brief synopsis of the play—read it. Additionally, read the program for any notes on the production. Reading the program before the performance generally clears up a lot of potential confusion.
- **It's okay to take notes.** Don't take notes like you are in class—because every time you look down to write something, you will miss something else. But absolutely make yourself notes at intermission and directly after the show. These notes will help you remember examples you will need for your critique.
- **Write your critique within a day (or so) of seeing the production.** Write your critique soon after seeing the performance. But also give yourself enough time to think about what you have seen. My recommendation usually follows this line: If you see the play on Friday evening, make yourself some additional notes when you get home. Those notes should include things that you really want to talk about in your critique. Then, on Saturday morning, read your notes. The things you have included may or may not seem as important as they seemed the night before; and pay particular attention to anything you notice that you didn't include, and add those things to your notes, if necessary. And finally, at some point later on Saturday or even Sunday morning, sit down and write your critique. This timing will allow your brain to mull over what you saw and see how the performance affected you.