7 Tips for Writing a Film Review

By Mark Nichol

When I wrote for my college newspaper, one of the assignments I enjoyed most was writing film reviews. And I was terrible at it, as I soon realized. Why? I was writing the equivalent of book reports: movie reports.

Fortunately, I came to my senses and realized that evaluating films and plays and the like (and, yes, books) is more complicated, yet more satisfying, that that. Here are some tips — not necessarily in the order in which they would be applied in your writing — for crafting movie reviews (which are more or less applicable for reviewing other types of composition, or even products like software or gadgets):

1. If circumstances permit, view the film more than once. It's easy to miss key elements, or even the whole point, after just a single viewing.

2. Express your opinion of the film, but support your criticism. If you are offended or disappointed or embarrassed, provide a valid reason, even if you think it is obvious. A film review that comes across as a personal attack on an actor, director, or screenwriter or a diatribe about a genre is a failed review.

3. Adjust the style of your review for the readership. If you're pitching reviews to a traditional publication, you're expected to be fairly evenhanded (though even mainstream film critics are permitted — nay, expected — to gently mock particularly inept filmmaking). If your target audience is fanboys (and fangirls) on a movie-geek Web site, though, feel free to take the gloves off. Either way, though, support your criticism with valid observations; hurling invective is not the same thing as evaluation.

4. Avoid spoilers. One of the most pernicious fairly recent developments in the review genre is the careless, thoughtless revelation of key plot points. It's a sign of professionalism to refrain from giving such information away. Exception: Reviews of previously released films don't necessarily adhere to this rule, though it's still considered sporting to warn readers or site visitors to skip to the next paragraph if they don't want to read something. Some classy sites actually code spoilers to be invisible unless the visitor scrolls over the blank area to highlight that passage in the review.

5. Judge the story. Are the character's actions justified, and are their motives plausible? Is there an internal consistency to the way each person behaves, or do some words, thoughts, or actions ring false? Does the plot make sense? Is the story line logical? Is the narrative arc well shaped, with an economy of form, or is it flabby or drawn out, with time-killing pointlessness?

6. Rate the actors. Do they meet the expectations dictated by the plot and other story elements? If not, is it their own thespian shortcomings, are they hampered by a poor script, or is there something about their performances that makes you believe the director is at fault? What could the performers, the screenwriters, or the filmmaker have done differently to make the movie work better?

7. Evaluate the technical elements. How do the cinematography, editing, lighting, sound, and other components support or detract from the film? Is music appropriate and effectively employed? You needn't know film-technology jargon to share your thoughts about how these elements contributed to or detracted from the whole.

Writing film reviews is in one way a thankless task: Often, readers will disagree with you, and many people will go to see movies without your wise guidance. How to avoid frustration? Writing about movies, like writing about just about anything else, should be primarily an exercise in enjoyment: You do it because you like doing it. If anybody else out there enjoys the result of your exercise in self-entertainment, so much the better — but you're your own primary audience (and your worst critic).

* * *

Standard elements that every review should contain

The title of the film – don't presume that just because your headline features the name of the movie you should skip mentioning it in the text. Always name the feature you've watched in the introductory period. This may seem like a stupid thing to point out, but it's one of the most common mistakes that students make

Summary – of course, the whole point of the review is to summarize the documentary or movie for people who haven't watched it yet. To make this as effective as possible, always assume that your professor hasn't seen it either. That way, you won't leave out some important details thinking he/she watched it already so they won't bother. As a reviewer, your job is to explain what happened in the film and express whether the filmmaker failed or succeeded. Again, saying you liked or disliked it isn't a viable comment. Your opinion has to be supported by specific reasons and examples from the feature itself

Filmmaker – it's always useful to do a little research on the person who directed the piece. Is that person a controversial figure? Is he/she known for a political stance? Does the filmmaker have a significant background? Devote a paragraph or two to the person behind the movie and his/her other works in order to establish the significance of the work you are reviewing for the filmmaker's career

Significance to your class – How does the content of the film fit into your course topic? Is it important for historical accuracy? What is the film's cultural significance? If the motion picture is based on the book you've analyzed in English class, you can mention similarities, differences, or some elements that film contains, but book doesn't and so on

Creative elements – filmmakers work hard to include creative elements into their motion pictures. How are these elements important to the plot and movie in general? For example, costumes can either enhance the movie or betray its intent. Colors can be vivid and lift the atmosphere or mood in the movie or they can be dull and make it seem depressing. Good sound effects enrich the viewing experience while bad ones only destroy everything. Moreover, camera movements and angles also add elements to the story. Take notes of symbols in the story, if any.

Actors - let's not forget the casting! Were the actors effective? Did they portray the role of a specific character successfully? Did they have good acting skills? Do you believe that some particular actor was the right fit for the role?

IMPORTANT: The elements listed above do not appear in any specific order. The placement of these components, or their omission, depends on multiple factors such as professor's preferences, relevance, the type of motion picture or documentary, course topic, and so on. One of the parts of movie review writing process is to arrange the basic components in the best way to create a

coherent, informative, and functional paper. Basically, just make sure your work has a logical and natural flow.

How to format a movie review

If your review is for the literature class, you'll highly likely have to adhere to MLA formatting guidelines. The general outline should be as follows:

- Introduction (with title, release date, background information)

- Summary of the story

- Analysis of the plot elements (rising action, climax)

- Creative elements (dialogues, characters, use of colors, camera techniques, mood, tone, symbols, costumes or anything that contributes or takes away from the overall plot)

- Opinion (supported with examples and facts from the story)

- Conclusion (announcing whether the filmmaker was successful in his/her purpose, re-state your evidence, explain how the motion picture was helpful for providing a deeper understand of course topic)

Here are some useful movie review writing tips that can help you:

- Watch the movie twice and take notes of all major and minor details, characters and such on a piece of paper. Don't rely on your memory only, that way you'd leave out some important details

- Collect the information about the movie through research. Find information about the director, theme, locations, plot, characterization, and other important things that can help you write your review

- Analyze the entire movie after watching it. This will require more time, but in order to write a review, you have to understand what you just watched. To do that, you'll have to evaluate it from the beginning to the end, just like you would analyze a book

- Draft an outline
- Include examples for everything you say about the movie e.g. if the casting is bad, then why is it? If dialogues are good/bad, then name an example or two. Make sure that everything you mention in the review is supported with evidence. That way your professor will know you watched a movie and developed critical thinking skills

- Consider the movie's originality and quality of scenes

MISTAKES TO AVOID

- Not focusing on the film – don't write about the history of cinematography or that particular genre, snacks, and other unnecessary details

- Inserting yourself – you're writing the review which means it reflects your understanding and opinion of the movie you've seen. Therefore, there is no need to write in first person all the time: I noticed this, I saw that, I liked this, I disliked that. As mentioned above, your review should be unbiased with trace of your opinion stated in the story and supported with evidence

- Not checking your facts about movie background and release date, director, casting etc.

- Giving out your opinion without mentioning any reason why you think that way

- Talking about irrelevancies

- Writing a review without a structure