



W. L. Adams Center for Writing

WRITING BOOK AND FILM REVIEWS

Reviewing a book or film involves reading or viewing the work carefully and then writing a review that includes the following:

- Introduction
- Summary
- Analysis/discussion
- Evaluation

In addition, a report or review may include background information about the work, comparisons to similar works, and discussions of major themes, motifs, or arguments.

Introduction

The introduction sets the stage for your review. Thus, you may choose to give your reader background information about the work or its topic, discuss the author or director, or simply tell something about your reading/viewing experience. Most writers include in the introduction pertinent information about the work and the person or people who produced it. You may also want to discuss the writer's or director's purpose and intended audience at this point. If you do not include this information in your introduction, you should be sure to include it elsewhere in the review or report. You cannot fairly critique a book or film without establishing its purpose and audience. Finally, you may want to end your introduction with a statement of your own thesis or argument or, at least, an indication of the focus of your review.

Summary

Your summary should provide your reader with an overview of the work you are reviewing but should not go into great detail. It should constitute only one fourth to one third of your total review. Inexperienced writers often make the mistake of trying to summarize the work in too much detail; thus the entire review is merely a summary. Remember that your summary is only a part of the total review and not necessarily the main part.

Because books and movies continue to exist after they are published or produced, you usually use the present tense in summarizing them. For example, you would write "The protagonist never **realizes** that she has been deceived" or

"The setting of the movie **is** a small town in New Hampshire."

Analysis/Discussion

After providing your readers with a summary of the work, you are ready to begin your own analysis and/or discussion of it. If you have not previously indicated the focus of your review, you will want to include in this section a thesis statement or a clear indication of your main point. Some reviews are persuasive in that you are making an argument for your evaluation or interpretation. For example, you might argue that a movie is well written and directed but that one actor's performance is disastrous or that a book is suspenseful and dramatic but poorly written. Or, you may choose to emphasize some other element of the work--the setting of a novel, the bias of a historical or scientific work, or the emotionally manipulative ending of a movie. But it is important to have a focus. You cannot do justice to every element of a work, so you must decide what element or elements you consider most significant to the work's success or failure. **Focusing on one or two elements will enable you to write a better review.**

Once you have narrowed your focus to one or two elements, you need to analyze these elements. To analyze means to take something apart, examine its individual parts, and determine how they function in relation to the whole work. For example, you might analyze a writer's skillful use of irony, a director's pacing of the action, a music director's use of music to heighten mood or suspense, or a cinematographer's camera angles. By analyzing certain elements of a work--pointing out not only **what** happens but also **how** and **why**--you will be more informative and, ultimately, more persuasive.

Experienced reviewers use specific examples from the work itself to prove their arguments. These examples constitute your evidence and support your own arguments. A good review is not just a summary of the work with an opinion tacked on but rather a discussion of the work that includes a well-supported argument. For example, if you claim that the author of a book is biased, you need to point out instances of bias. Or, if you argue that the dialogue in a movie is unconvincing, you need to cite specific lines of dialogue and point out why they are inappropriate. Below are some of the criteria on which reviewers most often focus:

Book Reviews: plot, characters, theme, prose style, narrative techniques, credibility and/or qualifications of the author, tone, arguments/supporting evidence, and accuracy of information

Film Reviews: director, actors, plot, setting, characters, cinematography, special effects, performances, musical score, and script

Evaluation

Your final evaluation of a work usually constitutes the conclusion of your review. It need not be either totally positive or negative. It may help you to think of this part of your review as your opportunity to discuss the work's strengths and weaknesses. To be convincing, however, you must do more than mention what you liked and did not like about the work. Most reviewers identify both the strengths and weaknesses of a work although, on occasion, you may want to focus strictly on one or the other. We offer some words of caution, however. It is very difficult to write an effective review if you are completely positive about everything. You can be completely negative and still write an interesting review, but if you are completely positive, your review will be bland at best.

Citing a Film in MLA Style, 8th ed.

In-text citations

Include the title and/or director or other relevant contributors in the text rather than parenthetically, or cite by title as with a television or radio broadcast.

Example: Often cited as revisionist Native-American history, Arthur Penn's *Little Big Man* (1970) portrays the U.S. Army in a negative light, causing some critics to review it as an anti-war film.

Reference Page

For conventional feature films, the format for a reference page citation includes director and principal performers. For example a dvd is cited like this:

Little Big Man. Dir. Arthur Penn. Perf. Dustin Hoffman, Faye Dunaway.
National General Pictures, 1970.

For electronic, web-based films, the reference page citation format indicates the streaming “container” as well as the url for the film:

Little Big Man. Dir. Arthur Penn. Perf. Dustin Hoffman, Faye Dunaway.
National General Pictures, 1970. Amazon,
<https://www.amazon.com/Little-Big-Man-Dustin-Hoffman/dp/B00003CXB5>