

How to Write an Effective Film Review

Choosing your film

Be adventurous. If you choose to write about a summer blockbuster then be aware that you will be competing with lots of other entrants who have similarly gone for an easy option. Believe it or not it is very much harder to write interestingly about a spectacular CGI dominated movie than a more thoughtful film dealing with more character-led events or set in a different period or country. This is why reviewing a film featured in National Schools Film Week is a good idea. The trouble with blockbusters is that it is hard to protect yourself from all the hype that surrounds them and which is suggesting the film is 'fantastic' and 'a hit' before you even see it.

Think about your motive for choosing your film – Is it because you like it? Or hate it? A strong opinion is a good place to start!

Viewing your film

When watching your chosen film, make notes if that helps. What jumps out at you? Note things like style, narrative, acting and mood. How does the film make you feel and how do you think it achieves this?

As you watch the film, note down any words to describe what you see as they come to you. For example; funny, tense, scary etc. You can think of ways to build upon these words in your review.

Writing your review

A good tip for approaching your review is to try and break it down into three sections:

1) Context

A good review will provide some information about where the film is situated with regards to others like it. Referring to other films will give readers an indication of what the film is like and whether they will enjoy it.

- Who are the filmmakers/actors and how does the film compare with their past films? This is often only worth noting if the director or actors are very well known and have made a lot of films.
- What is the genre of the film, and where does it fit with other films of the same genre? Does it cross genres? If the film deviates in some way from its genre, this is always an interesting point.

2) Content

- What is the film about? Include a brief outline plot, characters and themes, without giving too much away.
- Does the film have a conventional narrative? Is it easy to follow, for example? Don't just tell the story, it's your opinion readers want to read.
- If necessary, comment on the style, tone and mood. It is essential to give a strong idea of the (all-important) mood of the film. This is not about telling the reader what a film looks like, but explaining what sort of film it is. How does it make you feel and what sort of atmosphere does it evoke? What does the style and mood add to the story and how is this done? What does the film's use of colour, lighting and/or music add to the film, for example?

3) Opinion

- What do you think? Did you love it or hate it? Is the film effective within its genre? For example, if it's comedy, is it funny? If it's horror, is it scary? Don't be shy, but remember to justify your opinions! Give reasons and examples.
- Experiment with language – What words can be used to best describe the film and its characters? Avoid clichés; try to use sentences that capture the experience and are interesting to read.
- Think about the audience – Who is the film aimed at? And who do you think would enjoy it? Think about age groups and situations – is it a family film, or is it better suited to adults?

Activity 1

Look at this review for *Zombieland*: www.timeout.com/film/reviews/87869/zombieland.html

Can any of these elements be identified in this review? For those who have seen *Zombieland*, do you agree or disagree with the reviewer's thoughts? If so what can be changed/added?

This is not an exhaustive list of suggestions, nor is it a defining structure. A review is a form of creative writing that should be experimented with, as well as being well-structured and informative.

Some further tips for reviewing

- Reel in the reader quickly. Spend lots of time on your first paragraph – readers are going to scan that first to decide whether or not to read further and so you need to make it dramatic and interesting.
- Write in the present tense. For example: 'the main character of the film is called...' or 'when the film starts we see...'
- Avoid the reviews of others before writing your own.
- Write with affection; inspire curiosity. 'The first impulse of any good film critic... must be of love: to be moved enough to want to share their affection for a particular work or to relate their experience so that others may be curious.'

Alexis Tioseco – a Filipino Canadian film critic and a film professor at the University of Asia and the Pacific. Source: Movie City Indie www.mcnblogs.com/mcindie/archives/2009/09/post_20.html

Activity 2

- Look at the word count for the Young Film Critic of the Year Award for your age category.
- Write a review of a film you've seen at the cinema within the last year or at National Schools Film Week and make sure you stick to your word count.
- Make sure you've checked your review thoroughly, bearing in mind, the points outlined on pages 1 and 2.
- Enter your review into the Young Film Critic of the Year Award.

You can read the previous year's winning review at <http://www.youngfilmcritic.org/>. Doing so will help you work out the kind of standard expected of you, and should be quite reassuring too. The emphasis in the competition title is upon 'Young' – you are not expected to be professional critics but the more effort and care you put in the better your chances!