

## **How to Write a Film Review**

Excerpts from the CD-ROM created by Barbara Csenge and Mike Bann for the Sprockets Education Programme

Writing a successful film review is like baking really great cookies. As a chef you need to pay attention to essential ingredients to make the recipe work, but creativity and personal choices are what make the final result more tasty and interesting.

As a film review writer you must consider basic elements such as the story, character, technical details, sound/music and the theme or message in the film. A chef must think about who they are baking cookies for. A film reviewer, in the same way, should pay attention to their audience, who will read the review and what their tastes and interests might be. Not every element must be discussed in every review. The film you are reviewing will determine the elements that should be discussed.

As well, decisions about film are based on what you prefer (fantasy or science fiction) and what is happening in your world. To write a successful film review, it is important to lead or introduce your review with reasons for your choice and conclude with a summary of how all the elements, including the story, characters, technical details, sound/music and theme, work to make the film entertaining.

### **Lead/Introduction**

A strong introduction is an important element to any writing assignment. Film reviewers call this a lead and use it to draw the reader into the body of their review. A lead provides a broad picture of the importance of the film. This may have something to do with the actors, the novel from which the film is adapted, the theme or social issues dealt with in the film or some other noteworthy feature. Once this broad or general introduction is made the rest of the film review should deal with specific details in the film (character, plot, technical elements, sound and theme). When you get to the end of your review after discussing specific details of character, plot, technical elements, sound and theme, the conclusion should relate back to what you discuss in your lead. The overall effect should be to “wrap up” your point of view regarding the film.

### **Plot**

The plot is a pattern of events in the main story of the film. A film reviewer should summarize the key events but leave some mystery so that the reader is interested in seeing the film. Think about the beginning, middle and end of the

film and select the key events that shape the story. Summarize these but don't include the surprises that might ruin the enjoyment of the film for the viewer. For example, you could summarize a film based on the Cinderella fairy tale as the story of a young girl who struggles in a difficult relationship with her stepmother and stepsisters and searches for love with the magical support of a fairy godmother.

### **Characters**

Your review should evaluate the most interesting characters in the film. Certainly you will include the major roles but may also select some of the minor characters who are especially interesting. You can discuss how the characters are developed or revealed through what they do and say. You can also consider how they interact with other characters. In a film that has a popular actor, you may choose to discuss their acting and compare or discuss their roles in other films. Also discuss the appropriateness of the casting (selection of actors) to play certain roles.

Using the example of the Cinderella story, you could discuss how appropriately certain actors were cast to play the roles of the wicked stepmother or stepsisters (have they played similarly wicked roles in previous films?).

### **Technical Elements**

Technical elements are used by the film director to enhance communication and make the film experience more entertaining. Each effect in the film represents a choice that the director made. As a film reviewer you could comment on how these effects contribute to the improvement of the film. Are they entertaining? Do they improve the film? There are several types of technical elements that you can consider. Camera use is a basic technical aspect. Long shot, medium shot, close-up, extreme close-up, low-angle shot and high-angle shot are examples of the choices that are made during filming. Each of these can communicate a different message and invite a different response from the viewer.

Editing is an important technical aspect to consider in your film review. Just as each sentence and paragraph adds together to tell a story, each scene builds to form the story or narrative in the film. Editing represents the choices that the director makes in arranging the order of the scenes to tell the story.

Example: An editor might choose short, quick edits with close-ups of two people talking. The effect will be to create a sense of urgency about what is being discussed or draw attention to each character's participation.

Lighting is important to every scene, but not every scene requires lighting that will be obvious to the viewer. You could comment on lighting that you feel especially contributes to the overall effect of the film.

Example: In a deserted cabin in the woods or in a haunted castle, the lighting may be dark and shadowy to create the effect of mystery.

Special effects are used to improve the film experience. The use of these effects varies from film to film. In some films this can have a major or critical influence on the film as a whole.

Films involving magic, fantasy, science fiction and animation are some obvious examples of where special effects deserve some comments by the film reviewer. Some of these effects will involve very detailed technical knowledge. It is not necessary that you explain or understand how they were done. Instead, you could comment on the success or failure of the effects to improve the film experience. Try to be specific and use examples.

### **Sound**

Sound will be most noticeable to a young film reviewer in the form of specialized effects and music. You may choose to comment on the success of sound effects by indicating how they add to particular scenes or stimulate or reinforce an emotional response. In films that use music, it will be important to comment on how this affected your response to the film as a whole. Be guided by your emotional reaction and be confident to express these feelings when evaluating the contribution of sound to the film experience.

### **Theme**

The theme is the message or recurring idea in the film. In addition to a major theme, there may be minor themes that you may also choose to discuss. You can evaluate how effectively the director communicates the theme by commenting on specific scenes and characters. As always, the more specifically you support your ideas with examples, the clearer your argument will be to the reader. In addition to commenting on the film's effectiveness in communicating a theme or message, you may also choose to comment on the message itself. You may support the position expressed in the film or take a contrary (opposite) point of view. Again be sure to support your opinion with examples. In the classic fairy tale Cinderella, you might discuss the main theme of good triumphing over wickedness since the desirable handsome prince recognizes Cinderella's goodness over the evilness of her two stepsisters. You could indicate how the film communicates that Cinderella is good and how the wickedness of her sisters is illustrated. In addition, you could also comment on other themes or messages in the film such as the challenges of living with stepsisters and the film's realistic or unrealistic portrayal of this relationship.

### **Conclusion**

The conclusion should balance the whole review by returning to the broad comments or issues presented in the lead or introduction. The conclusion should summarize the overall effect of character, plot, sound, technical elements and theme and return to the issue presented in the lead. Conclude your review with a summary of how all the elements, when combined, make the film effective.

## Checklist

- I have included a title for my film review.
- I have summarized the plot without giving away the ending.
- I have included a strong lead/introduction.
- I have discussed significant characters and actors.
- I have discussed important technical elements.
- I have evaluated the sound and/or movie soundtrack.
- I have stated and evaluated the theme.
- I have included a strong conclusion summarizing my ideas.
- I have edited my review for spelling and grammatical errors.
- I have included submission details with my review.

Enter your film review of your favourite film and you could be one of our special jury members at the Sprockets Toronto International Film Festival for Children (April 18–24, 2009).

Submission Guidelines:

**Sprockets Young People's Juries** decide which films win prizes at the festival. They actively discuss the films they see and work collaboratively with other kids to reach consensus on their reviews. Sprockets jurors attend the festival for free and watch films in special reserved jury seating, all while enjoying complimentary popcorn and drinks. Winners of the internationally recognized awards will be announced at the end of the festival.

In order to apply for a place on the juries, young film fans aged between 8 and 12 years old should write a short review (100 to 250 words) of a movie they either really enjoyed or didn't like.

Reviews can be submitted by email ([juries@tiffg.ca](mailto:juries@tiffg.ca)), by fax (416-967-9477) or by mail:

Sprockets Toronto International Film Festival for Children  
Attention: Young People's Jury Contest  
2 Carlton Street, Suite 1600  
Toronto ON, M5B 1J3

All reviews must be received by **February 27, 2009**.