

# HOW TO REVIEW A PLAY

*FROM THE WRITING CENTER AT THE UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN-MADISON*

## PREPARING TO WRITE A PLAY REVIEW

Below are some tips to help you prepare to write a play review:

### THE NATURE OF THE ASSIGNMENT

Because the performance of any play is such an ephemeral experience, writing a play review can be an exciting, though difficult, task. You have to be both spectator taking in and enjoying the performance and critical analyst of the production itself. You have to be able to provide a very brief summary of the play, a close objective analysis of the performance you attend, and an interpretation and evaluation of the entire ensemble of staging, acting, directing, and so on.

The review assignment asks you to analyze in an objective manner the relative success or failure of a given production. Note that you are not asked simply to summarize the plot or give an opinion regarding the text of the play being mounted; your review must be grounded in the production itself. Your job is to describe the production accurately, and then to render a value judgment of it based upon what you have seen and what you expected. The assignment will test your skill as a reader of the play and as an observer and critic of the production.

In addition to grounding your review on the production you witness, you must be careful to limit your review to a few essential observations in support of your thesis (which will be discussed below). You must concentrate on a few important ideas and aspects of the production and focus your attention on only what you consider the most significant parts of the production itself. Unlike a newspaper review, which can be loosely structured and superficial, your assignment is quite definite. You are not asked to cover a wide variety of production elements (i.e. performance of every actor, every costume change, every set change, every directorial decision, and so on); instead, the assignment demands that you develop a few key ideas in thoughtful detail.

Remember, too, that your stance is to be objective and critical, not impressionistic and merely nasty. A critic is not someone who simply “criticizes,” but a person who studies, analyzes, and then renders a rational judgment of what he/she has seen. Your tone will be very important in making your review reliable and intelligent.

### BEFORE YOU ATTEND THE PRODUCTION

Read the play before going to the production. (It is important to be prepared for the production you plan to attend; otherwise, you run the risk of having to see it several times.)

- In your mind, have a good sense of how a “standard” production might look, complete with a sense of what the characters might look like, the type of costuming that might be used, a suitable set design, and an appropriate rendering of the theme and tone of the work.
- Pick out, as you read, several critical or problematic points within the play that may be of particular interest to watch for in the production you are about to attend. If your instructor has asked you to pay particular attention to certain elements, make sure that you are prepared to recognize them in performance.

## **ATTENDING THE PRODUCTION**

**Attend** the play with an open mind, a willingness to accept the play as the director has presented it in production.

- Note any deviations from your concept of a “standard” production and try to find a good explanation for that deviation. (Is the director trying to “say” something new or different? Was your sense of the play somehow inaccurate, or were you shown new insights by the director’s production?)
- You may want to consider some of the following:
  - Why the choice of costumes, and why the set design?
  - How did the actors deliver their lines (seriously, comically, realistically, formally)? Were there any significant actions or gestures that contributed to the play’s meaning?
  - Were any “special effects” utilized (consider lighting, sound, audience participation, machinery)?
  - Were any significant cuts made in the script?

After the performance, jot down the details you recall and talk about the performance with friends. You’ll need these details for your paper in order to substantiate your argument.

**Evaluate** the performance.

- Did the director miss any important opportunities to convey something you were able to see in your reading of the play?
- Would you have liked to have seen more attention paid to what you perceived as critical passages, passages the director seemed less interested in?
- Why would you have preferred this attention, and why do you think the director avoided giving the passage such attention?

**Consider** the following practical aspects:

- What kind of stage does the director have at his disposal? What kinds of restrictions does the stage impose on the director concerning movement and set design?

- Are the actors professionals, amateurs, or students? What restrictions does this impose on the director? Are the actors capable of dealing with the script's requirements? (Be fair to the actors in your assessment of their talents and the level of their "craftsmanship.")

## WRITING THE REVIEW

Below are some tips for writing play reviews:

### WRITING THE INTRODUCTION

The introduction should include the following:

- The title of the play, the name of the playwright, and any pertinent historical information regarding them (other similar works from this period? by this writer?).
- The name of the director, the place and date of the production you attended, and the name of the production company (again, do you know of any previous work by this company? this director?).
- The thesis of your review, which should include (possibly in more than a single statement) the following:
  - A general impression of the relative success or failure of the production, based on what you actually saw and on your initial impression of how the play should have been performed.
    - (Note that even if the production did not exactly coincide with your own conception of the play, you should not feel obliged to condemn the performance outright. Be open-minded and willing to weigh pros and cons.)
  - Examples: Papp's production of *Lear* captured all the horror of a world where love can't be counted on and where life is nasty, brutish, and appallingly short.
    - (Note that this thesis asserts that Papp captured the essence of what is in the text itself — the expectations set up by the thesis are that the reviewer will then analyze the methods by which the director achieved this effect.)
  - Examples: Smith's *You Can't Take It With You* made me sympathize with the notion that freedom must permit eccentricity and even, to a point, endorse it. Without that sympathy, the play would have been reduced to pure chaos and would have failed to portray an American ideal of freedom.
    - (This thesis suggests that "sympathy" was the director's intention. Note also that the reviewer gives a strong indication of what he/she expected to find in the production.)
- Since you will not be expected to discuss all aspects of the production, focus your thesis on one or two major concerns that the performance has or has not addressed. Read your assignment carefully to find out which aspects of the performance are to be emphasized in your review.

- Example: In *You Can't Take It With You*, the acting by the family members on the open, exposed stage displayed an innocent and vigorous freedom, as well as a proud independence in their confrontation with accepted norms of behavior.

## WRITING THE STATEMENT AND SUMMARY

Include a brief thematic summary (but not a plot summary) of the play, and support that summary with concrete evidence from the text.

You can include this summary in the introduction; or, if you wish to expand the summary, include it in a separate paragraph following the introduction.

## WRITING THE BODY OF THE PAPER: THE REVIEW

Remember that in the body of the paper you are obliged to deal specifically with each element of the production that you mentioned in the introduction and thesis.

In order to give your review a tight internal logic and cohesiveness, you should also discuss these elements in the order that you outlined in the introduction. Such points of discussion might include the non-technical (acting, directing) and/or the technical (lighting, scenery, costumes) aspects of the production.

For each element that you discuss:

- **Describe:** In as brief and precise a manner as possible, describe in detail the physical aspects of what you saw performed. Keep in mind at all times that whatever you include must in some way contribute to the assertion you made in your introduction and thesis. Focus on particular scenes or performances that will provide the evidence for your final evaluation of the play.
  - Example: The tempest scene in *Lear* utilized a particularly hostile set in order to universalize the suffering depicted throughout the play. The lights were dimmed and the backdrop was flat black. Against this backdrop were propped, in no particular order, seven skulls that looked out over the events to come.
    - (Note the vivid description of what was seen, and the use of detail to convey that vividness. The passage will work nicely as evidence for an overall, positive evaluation of the production.)
- **Interpret, Analyze, Evaluate:** This part of the paper requires the most thought and organization and consequently receives the most attention from your reader. After you have finished describing important elements of the production, proceed to evaluate them.

For example, you would need to answer the following questions regarding the last description of *Lear*:

- Why were the lights dimmed at the beginning of the scene? (shock effect? slow unfolding of horror?)
- Why was the backdrop painted black? (contrast? mood?)
- Why was there no order to the skulls? Why seven? (emblem of disorder or chaos? significance in number?)

In other words, assume that everything used in production has significance, but don't panic if you cannot find "answers" for all the questions raised by what you see in the production.

In the evaluation, you are given the opportunity to attack as well as commend the performance; if the production fails to answer questions that you feel need answers, then say so. If the question or problems are relatively minor, ignore them. Don't quibble at the expense of missing the more important concerns.

### **WRITING THE SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION**

Your conclusion should not merely recapitulate your thesis in a mechanical way.

Rather, you should try to show why your response to the play is valid and significant, based on what you have described in the body of the paper.

Do not add any significant new material, but don't be afraid to leave your reader with something to think about.