Writing Effective Critiques and Review Papers

A review of a book, movie, or theatrical performance depends upon a detailed breakdown of the reading or viewing experience. General comments such as "I really liked this book" or "This was a terrible movie" are not particularly useful in this kind of review because they don't offer any concrete reasons for the reviewer's opinion.

A review, which is sometimes called a critique or an evaluative paper, usually provides 1) some general background about the creator, the work, and its context; 2) an overview of the topics and themes the work addresses; 3) an acknowledgment of what the creator has done well or of the contribution the work has made to the field; and 4) an analysis of what could have been done better.

Some Questions to Consider Before You Start Writing

➢ What kind of work is it? Are there certain expectations, styles, symbols, or technical limitations associated with this kind of work? Is the work calling upon a particular genre or tradition? In what ways is it similar to other works from that tradition? In what ways is it unique, subversive, or controversial in relation to similar works?

➢ Who is the intended audience for this work? What assumptions and expectations would they have had? Who has been excluded—either purposely or by accident—from this ideal audience?

➢ When and where was the work created, and does it have any special relation to that historical period or cultural context? If the work is a remake, reboot, or revival, is there anything meaningful about the change from its original context to this new setting?

➢ What was the work about? Consider including a *brief* summary of the plot or other descriptive details about the work. Remember: your goal is to review, not merely recap.

➢ What seems to be the creator's main purpose? To offer advice? To show how things really are? To show how things could be? To shock? To entertain? To speak in a voice that's not usually heard? To speak truth to power? To offend? To bring people together?

➢ What is the main point that the work seems to be making, and do you agree with that point? Does that point reflect reality as you understand it? What are the real-world ramifications of making such a point? If people paid attention to that point, would the world be a better place?

➢ Was the work consistent in quality? Did it satisfy or surpass your expectations?

➢ Did the author do anything innovative or exceptionally well? Do you recommend the work?

➢ Did the work ever appear to contradict itself? Perhaps a character's motivations didn't make any sense? Perhaps the plot was illogical? Perhaps the fictional world didn't obey its own "rules," and you were unable to suspend disbelief? Or it presented misleading information?

➢ Was anything done exceptionally badly? What specific improvements would you suggest?

➢ For book reviews, consider the writing. Was the book well organized? Were the sentences easy to follow? Was it engaging? Were there parts that were distracting, disappointing, or annoying? Did you expect to learn something that the author didn't follow through on?

➢ For reviews of movies, television, plays, and other performances, don't just think about the actors, musicians, or dancers. Consider people who may have contributed behind the scenes, such as the director, costume designers, scriptwriters, music directors, editors, set designers, lighting directors, choreographers, conductors, producers, cinematographers, and marketing team.