

# WRITING REVIEWS IN THE VISUAL AND PERFORMING ARTS

No. 30 in the Writing Center Handout Series

*Don't let writing reviews of art exhibits, concerts, plays, or dance performances stump you! Be the artist of a carefully crafted review with these guidelines.*

## Before you begin:

- Review your syllabus. Are there any specific details that your instructor has asked you to notice or include? If so, be sure to make a note of them at the event.
- Take detailed notes at the event. Don't trust yourself to remember important parts of the event—write them down! If you are going to be at a performance where the lights will be dim, practice writing without looking at your paper, or consider taking a small light to write by if it will not distract others.
- Make use of your event program. It can be a handy resource for important information.

## As you write:

- Your review should give one clear, dominant impression of the work. What is your overall point of view regarding the experience? Communicate this idea up front in your introduction. The dominant impression may be an overall reaction, or it may select one aspect of the work as most noteworthy. The impression may draw from elements such as plot, character, theme, language, music or sound.
- Prove your credibility as a reviewer. For example, if you are writing a movie review about a Samuel L. Jackson film, display your knowledge of the subject by talking about his other performances.
- Use summary moderately. It's important to let your readers know what happened, but they don't need a play-by-play account. The reader will be more interested in what you, the reviewer, thought about the event.
- Use specific, concrete details to describe the work. Remember, we have five senses, not just one or two. Include important details like the date, time, and location of the event. Go beyond superficial description and discuss how the exhibit made you feel, what it reminded you of, or how it could have been changed.
- You can also try to determine what the artists or performers intend you to feel or think. Were they successful?
- Make insightful comments on the work in relation to the knowledge you are gaining in class and from your reading. Use vocabulary words and concepts from class discussions in your descriptions.

## Tying it all together:

- Conclude your review with a significant statement about the experience as a whole. What needs to be said about the event that you have not already said?
- Read over your review. Make sure your comments throughout the paper match your overall impression of the work, as stated in your introduction and conclusion.

## Consider answering these questions in your review:

- What is the significance of the title of the work?
- Who was the audience for this work? Did the work meet or push the audience's expectations?
- How did other elements (scenery, costumes, lighting, etc.) enhance or detract from the overall impression?
- What were your favorite and least favorite parts of the work?
- Did the work engage you from the beginning? If not, when did you start to become more directly involved? When did the work "take off" for you?
- Were there any significant problems with your experience? How could the performance have been improved? Should another person attend this event? Why or why not?

For more information about writing art reviews, see

*A Short Guide To Writing About Art*, Sylvan Barnet  
*ARTiculating: Teaching Writing in a Visual World*, Pamela B. Childer,  
Eric H. Hobson, and Joan A. Mullin  
*A Short Guide to Writing about Film*, Timothy Corrigan



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