

The Genre of Reviews: You Want Me To Do What?!?

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Coursey's article is about the experience of learning a new genre. She learned about writing in an informal manner for a movie theatre review, and she describes that struggle. She discusses how she was taught to use formal language in certain situations and that it was difficult to use casual language for this assignment. Overall, her article is about her experience as a growing writer and how she learned that even though something is hard, it can still be worth learning.

I've always been able to talk in a casual way to my friends and my family; I use slang every day just like anyone my age does. I watch shows like *Jersey Shore*, and I understand every word Snooki yells out. I am a part of a generation that abbreviates every single word in a text message. I always text my friends back with words like "def" or "totes" instead of "definitely" and "totally." One thing, however, that I've always struggled with, is writing in an informal manner. That sounds absolutely ridiculous to a lot of people, especially students my age. Most people would think that writing the way we speak is a lot easier. That is not the case for me; it has always been drilled into my head to write formally. I always write out full words instead of using contractions and make long sentences with neat and organized paragraphs. In school I was taught to follow a strict claim, evidence, and warrant and to use it religiously. But all of that changed my freshman year of college when I was introduced to the genre of the review.

Writing a review was our first assignment in my college English class, and I thought it would be a piece of cake. I thought, "I have read so many reviews of movies and things like that, this will be so easy." I was wrong. Defining a review is quite complex because a review encompasses so many different ideas. Simply googling "the definition of review" provides a lot of different answers. I learned

that a review is commentary or criticism about a specific place or thing. That thing could be a restaurant, movie, or even a performance. The instructor introduced the assignment and led a class discussion on what she was expecting. One of the most important things we talked about is what makes a review stand out. The instructor asked us to think about a newspaper review and specifically asked us to read a *Daily Vidette* review and see what we noticed about the writing style.

The review I chose will always stand out in my brain. It was about a local ice cream place, and I could not believe the language that was used. For example, the author talked about the atmosphere by saying, “Chill Out! lived up to its name by hosting a relaxed atmosphere,” I would have never worded this statement that way. I would have said, “Walking into Chill Out! I could tell that the workers and customers were very friendly and gave off good vibes which created an inviting atmosphere.” Sure I have read newspaper articles, and movie or restaurant reviews, but I never really gave much thought to what makes them different from any other paper I have written. But after reading that review I realized I write in a completely different style than the author did. I would have worded that statement in a completely different way. Not only did the article use an informal style, but it actually kept me reading. In class we talked about how review article sentences are supposed to be short and concise, and the language is informal to keep the reader interested, which was exactly how that review had been written. After being told that, I was impressed and surprised that it actually worked: I really did want to keep reading.

After discussing the style, my class also discussed how no one wants to read a six-page article about whether or not they should go to a restaurant and that a review article should not be too lengthy. The instructor encouraged us to make our review articles informal and to give interesting information first and more boring stuff at the end (so the reader actually keeps reading!). She also let us know that the trick to keeping the article interesting is to make an observation and then comment on it. For example, the restaurant reviewer said that the atmosphere was very warm and inviting which led to a really comfortable and enjoyable dinner experience. Our class also talked about how important audience is to understanding how to write a review: as an author of a review, it is imperative to remember who you are writing to. A *Daily Vidette* article, for example, is focused on speaking to college students while *The New York Times* is geared towards an older audience. After learning more about the review genre, I began thinking about how hard it would be for me to write in that manner. I didn’t know how to begin a paper without thinking claim, evidence, and warrant. We had only begun to discuss what a review should be and I was already stressed.

We were each asked to pick a place in the Bloomington-Normal community we had never been to and write a review on our new place. I looked around and most students seemed pleased and figured this assignment seemed simple enough. I, on the other hand, was terrified; my fears were not eased in the

slightest by this news. All of my classmates were pumped to explore a new place and I felt like the kid in old time movies sitting in the corner with a dunce cap on thinking that this assignment would ruin my English career forever. The only thought going through my head now was, “you want me to do what?!?” Even though I knew I would get to explore my new community, all I could think about was how I was so comfortable using my claim, evidence, warrant format and my very formal and proper language and how it was scary for me to let go, even for this particular assignment. Although I was excited about going on an adventure to a new place of my choice, I knew that sitting down to write this assignment was not going to be easy.

I thought about review articles I have read and what stuck out to me were movie reviews. They were also a big part of our class discussion. While I knew I couldn’t write about a movie because that is not a place or thing (which is what the class assignment asked for), I thought I would go to the Normal Theatre in uptown Normal. I had always had an interest in the theatre and thought it looked like a cute and fun place to explore. Its location is perfect (decently close to the quad) and it looked like a theatre out of an old black and white movie. After class I looked up movie times, grabbed my pen, some paper, and my boyfriend, and I was off. I quickly learned this theatre was different from other theatres and not just because of the old-fashioned look it had; I have never even heard of any of the movies they were showing that night.

One thing I knew was that research is vital when writing a review. As awkward as I felt walking around with my notepad and pen, I knew that later I would be happy to have so many notes. And the embarrassment was well worth it. My boyfriend and I were easily the youngest people in the theatre, and the other movie goers gave us some interesting looks while I whipped out my pen and frantically scribbled notes before the lights went down. Most people gave us “oh, college students” look while others seemed confused. I found out that when writing a review, it is important to take notes at the new place so it’s easier to remember all of the small details and better comment on them. When I got home, I looked at my notes and tried to relive the experience. I had written about my first impression of the theatre from the outside, what it looked like on the inside, and even how the theatre had smelled. I wrote about the good things and the bad things. Here are some examples of my notes:

old fashioned looking sign, bright lights outside, doesn’t look like a normal theatre, ticket booth outside, feels old, smells like old people when you walk inside, lots of older people who volunteer to work there, nice inside, looks like it has been partially renovated, actually has a place to buy food, no one in the theatre is college aged!

My notes made the experience look like a cliché movie scene, but I knew that I had enough information to write the review, that I had had a good

experience, and that I would be able to write a great article. I would write about what I saw and then make comments about my observations. I tried to keep it concise, casual, and clear.

With my notes next to me I sat down at my desk and stared at a blank computer screen. I knew that I had to write in a completely different style and I just wasn't sure how to start. A part of my first draft looked something like this:

Every person inside the theatre had a smile on their face as the lights were dimmed and the theatre darkened. It could have been due to the wonderful atmosphere, the delicious food, or the simple fact that we were there to see a great movie. If you have never been to the Normal Theatre, get a group of friends together, grab a boyfriend or girlfriend, or go by yourself because it will be an unforgettable experience at this not so normal theatre.

Many paragraphs like these with formal sentences and language formed in my head, but I knew that I couldn't write like that. Focusing on what made the review genre different was the most important thing at that moment and I kept that in the back of my mind. I looked at the notes I had written about the theatre again and decided to just jump right in. For example, rather than go into long detail about the marquee and discuss how it looked very old, I said that theatre had an old school marquee and I briefly described it and said that it really gave the theatre attitude. I thought about my audience, other Illinois State students, and tried to make it relevant and interesting to them. Here is another excerpt that demonstrates how after thinking more about the review genre I was able to make the draft more informal:

Everyone had a smile on their face as the lights dimmed; it could have been the wonderful atmosphere, the good food, or the simple fact that we were about to see a great movie. If you have not checked out The Normal Theatre yet, grab your friends, your boyfriend or girlfriend, or go by yourself, because it will be an unforgettable experience at this not so normal theatre.

After a couple hours I was done with my first draft. As I re-read my paper, I had a big smile on my face; while my paper had a long way to go, I had finished my first draft! I realized that while it was uncomfortable for me to write in a different kind of genre, it was something that I could do all along. I hated the entire process of writing and learning about review articles, but looking back, it was a valuable skill to learn. I would have never thought to make reading a paper so interesting by using tricks like short and concise sentences. Or that research for a paper—even a review—is such a crucial part of making it successful. I am happy to know that writing informally is something I can actually do, and something I can do well, and that I can now use those skills when writing in other genres. I didn't think I would learn many new skills in my freshman English class, but learning a new review was a difficult and rewarding experience.



Allie Coursey is a sophomore at Illinois State University. She is a history education major and cannot wait to teach her own class one day. She is also proud to be a member of Alpha Gamma Delta sorority, which takes up most of her free time at school. Other than that, she enjoys just having fun with her friends like any other college student.