

# How to write a theatre review

**By Karen Fricker**

There is a recognisable, standard format for a theatre review.

## The First Line

You want to grab your reader with a smart and interesting first line, also called a lede. This opening line should establish your “way in” to the review, presenting your overall critique of the show in an open-ended yet still specific way. You are casting out a hook with your first line, so it needs to be sharp and catchy in order to grab your reader’s attention, and make them want to keep reading. This isn’t an invitation to sacrifice substance for style, however; take this first line as an opportunity to distil your review to a single sentence. What’s the big “thing” you want to say about this show?

## Elements of the Production

When reviewing, there are a number of aspects of a production to consider, and they tend to be presented in a standard order: plot (what happens in the play), direction and interpretation (how the play is treated by the director or creative team), performance (the work of the actors), design (set, costume, lights, audio-visual), and, if relevant, audience reaction (how the audience responded to the play, did the jokes hit, did they seem emotionally moved, etc.). It’s generally helpful to begin with plot, as this can provide context for the rest of these categories. Use your discretion, however: if your “way in” to the piece is through analysing one of these other aspects, structure your review accordingly.

## The Three Major Components

Remember that a theatre review needs to include three major components: description (What happened? How did it happen?), analysis (What do you think it meant and what do you think the show’s relationship was to the culture in which it was produced?), and judgement (Did it work? Was it of quality?).

You don’t need to split these things up; that is, you don’t have to have only description in one paragraph and only analysis in another, for example. In fact, doing so tends to bog down your review. A much more organic approach is to move from description, to analysis, to judgement on a single point or aspect of a show. For example, say you have identified a particular actor’s performance as central to a show’s overall success or failure. You will start by describing their performance, being as specific as possible, then analysing this performance in both the context of the show and the culture in which it is produced, and finally a judgement (or, to use essay writing terms, a conclusion) about this performance.

## In Closing

After you have written a smart and engaging lede, and worked through your description, analysis, and judgement, you will want to finish off your review with a fantastic closing line.

This is your sign off, and it should do similar work to your lede: keep your reader's attention until the very last word, and sum up your argument about the show. If you've crammed your review full of great description/analysis/judgement, this is a moment to really drop the mic!

### **Acknowledging the Makers**

Apart from format, there are several other standard conventions for writing theatre reviews. First, always make sure to name each and every actor, designer, writer, etc. whose work you make reference to in your review. This is both a courtesy (it would kind of stink if you were playing Ophelia and a critic raved about your performance but never mentioned you by name...) and just good practice at being specific and detailed in your description. With this in mind, it's useful to avail yourself of all documents provided to you by a show or theatre company: the program, of course, but also websites, Facebook pages, etc. – anything that might have helpful information.

### **Do your Research**

These theatre documents are also helpful in a second convention of review writing: research. While the show itself should take centre stage in your review, it is best practice to do a bit of reading up about the company, the show, the venue, etc. The first and best place to go is the programme, which should have a statement by the director about the show, as well as perhaps a statement by the company's artistic director and information about the company's history, goals, and mandate.

If this information isn't included in the program, then check out their website. This research is vital in ensuring your analysis (in which, remember, you are examining the show in its larger context, including its cultural context) is backed up by facts. You may find you also need to do some research on the play text, which will have its own – perhaps different – cultural and historical context. If in doubt, do your research! It can only help.

### **Use the Present Tense**

A third review writing convention is the use of present tense. As you may already be aware from writing essays on plays, it's customary to write about theatre in the present tense ("Ophelia is a compelling tragic character," not "Ophelia was a compelling tragic character"). This may seem a bit counterintuitive at first, especially since you are writing about an experience at the theatre that is most definitely in your past. When you write in the present tense, your description will be more engaging, your analysis more in-depth, and your judgement all the more persuasive. It gives your writing a sense of immediacy. It emulates the same quality of live-ness and being in the moment as live theatre itself.

### **Revise and Revise Again!**

Perhaps the biggest key to good review writing is revision. Once you've written a solid draft, go back through and make sure you've hit all three of the bases, description, analysis, judgement: make sure you've told the reader what happened; what you thought it was about; and whether you thought it was successful. You are, in essence, presenting an argument about a show – you are arguing for your opinion and insight as a critic. Does your

argument make sense? Is it convincing? Ensuring you have included all three major components will do a lot to persuade your reader.

This may seem like a lot of writing, but remember that theatre reviews are still relatively short documents. Keep your word count between 350–400 words (the word count function will be your friend). This is not a lot of words! You will need to be economical, and get to the point fast in order to hit all the points you need to hit in a review.

**And always remember – your opinions are valid, important, and valuable, so why not make sure you are conveying them as well as you possibly can? Happy writing!**

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