

Reviewer, how to get a gig

Specialties · By Simon Townsend · 5 min read

Your great life as a reviewer, and how to win a gig

By SIMON TOWNSEND

A journalist who wins a gig as a permanent reviewer can lead a wonderful life, and be well paid for enjoying restaurant meals, travel, dance performances, concerts, consumer goods, art shows, plays, books, movies . . . whatever.

Some reviewers' positions last for decades.

You must start by loving your own opinion. You must regard your opinion as worthwhile, correct and an enjoyable viewpoint for others to read. You have to a bit of an egoist. If you're shy, retiring and quiet about your opinions, you're unlikely to make a good reviewer.

I do not agree with Thomson's writing courses which express negativity towards journalists expressing their own opinions. Since this part of the course was written, mainstream journalism has gone heavily in favour of writers expressing personal opinions. Not all articles in all mainstream publications, mind you. But certainly expressing your own attitudes could actually brighten up your article and make it more saleable to your target publication.

You wouldn't send an opinionated article to a publication that you have studied and found that few writers express their own views. So, forget the course's advice. Forget what I say. What have you found are your target publication's preferences?

Do you enjoy writing a piece of journalism that could be described as an "opinion piece" or "essay" or "analysis"? Or it could be a column which is essentially a writer's personal opinion.

An article for a mainstream publication starts with an idea, then continues through research, then the gathering of quotes or the conducting of an interview with some person. I have to warn you: it's hard to sell opinion pieces and reviews.

Nearly every freelancer would love to be a reviewer. To get paid for enjoying what you enjoy most is everyone's dream. To have a spot in a publication, regularly reviewing your favourite thing, would be a dream come true.

If you've got your heart set on writing reviews, then go for it.

If you want to create a job for yourself as a reviewer, here's how to do it:

1. First and foremost, decide on your target publication.
1. Read, read and read some more . . . read every single review in your area of interest
1. Write one example review.
1. Write a list of one-sentence descriptions of each topic for your next 20 reviews.
1. Then write two more examples of your reviews.
1. Attach a passport-style portrait photo of you.
1. Send a short covering letter, your three reviews and your list to the right person at your target publication.

What is a review?

By SIMON TOWNSEND

What makes a good review? What is a badly conceived review? And anyway, what IS a review?

That's a bit like asking how long is a piece of string, what color is it and what's it made of? I invented, produced and fronted a review program on ABC-TV in the early 90s. It was called TVTV and aired at 6.30pm for half-an-hour, Monday to Thursday.

My panelists and I reviewed television programs from around the world. I tried to write a long set of notes to myself and to my reviewers about what constituted a review. This was incredibly hard to define. If you read reviews of movies, new cars, TV programs, books, art, theatre and restaurants, you find that a review can be almost anything.

Sometimes you read a review of a book about, say, the history of the Australian Labor Party. You get to the end of the review and almost nothing has been written about the book, but the reviewer has let you know his full opinion of the Labor Party. Is that a review?

Sometimes you read a review of a movie you've already seen, and you wonder if the reviewer saw the same movie. The reviewer's observations and opinions seem to be about some OTHER movie. Is that a review?

Sometimes you read a review of a restaurant in which the reviewer believes the place to be vile and horrible and rates it 1-out-of-20, and yet it's been in business 20 years. It can't be that bad! The reviewer is being stupidly critical. Is that a review?

I'm blown if I can come up with a definition of a review. But seeing I've written hundreds of reviews, and I've been the subject of TV reviewers, and I've read thousands of reviews, let me attempt some kind of explanation of what makes a review.

Undoubtedly the best review is the one you agree with. But that doesn't help you write a review. Here's some thoughts.

- (1.) Readers prefer strong opinions. The best reviews contain passion and a definite point-of-view. Readers also want some insight, something they hadn't thought of, something that hasn't been mentioned elsewhere. What do I mean by insight? I can't define it, but you'll know it when you read it (or write it).
- (2.) No review is required (legally or morally) to be "fair and reasonable" since no-one has a clearcut definition of what's fair and reasonable. What's fair and reasonable to me is whatever I personally agree with. What's fair and reasonable to an actor is whatever praises and admires him/her. A reviewer is not required to be "without bias" as we are all biased (we all have attitudes and belief systems). But a reviewer is (legally and morally) required to be "without malice". That is, you can't pour scathing criticism on some actor out of personal revenge because he/she has, say, spurned your romantic advances, or, you hate his/her religious beliefs.
- (3.) You must be accurate, or your editor will distrust you. Get every tiny detail correct. Or other journalists who want your gig will say to your editor: "What would he/she know about the subject? He/she can't even be accurate about [[spellings, dates, prices, facts, etc]]."
- (4.) You must be knowledgeable, because review gigs go only to those who know their topic (or appear to) and don't make dumb mistakes mentioned in (3.). If you review wine, you'd better know your grapes. If you review fashion, you must never misspell Armani or Versace. And so on.
- (5.) Nothing (NOTHING!) is perfect. There is no perfect movie, no perfect holiday, no perfect TV program and no perfect new product. No one wants to read a review that reads like an over-the-top public relations release. A reviewer is under an obligation to point out shortcomings, even those of a 19-out-of-20 restaurant. (No restaurant ever scores 20-out-of-20.)
- (6.) How do you become a reviewer? Well, first you must write a collection of reviews. That starts with writing your FIRST one. Just do it. Write a review now, today, say 500 words maximum. Make it a review of something you have experienced recently. A play, a product, a movie, a new motorbike, whatever. First, go out and buy some publications that contain reviews and read them all, noting what makes these reviews worth reading. You can look up reviews on the internet too. Then sit down and write your own review. Keep on writing reviews, and importantly, keep on READING them to become familiar with the many different ways of doing reviews.

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