

By Fred Duckworth

The **Complete**
Narrative
WRITING

Language Arts Program

For the first time in his life little Deel began to understand why it was that no one in the flock could ever be found swimming in the pond on those days when Catfish and Coyote **See the van. hat in a cap. one or two fish, red and blue fish.**

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Narrative Writing

OVERVIEW

This year you will write and perhaps even self-publish an authentic, honest-to-goodness literary work of art. To help you get a better idea of exactly what factors writers take into consideration when creating literary works, let's have you begin by writing a book review much like those found in real-life periodicals (newspapers and magazines).

WHAT IS A BOOK REVIEW?

A book review describes, analyzes and evaluates a publication, expressing the reviewer's opinion of the work as supported by evidence from the book itself.

GENERAL DESCRIPTION

A book review considers the quality, meaning, and significance of a book. It should focus on the book's purpose, content and authority. It is not a book report or a summary. It is a reaction paper in which strengths and weaknesses of the material are analyzed. It should include a statement of what the author has tried to do, evaluate how well the author did it, and present evidence to support this evaluation.

There is no right way to write a book review. Book reviews are highly personal and reflect the opinions of the reviewer. A review can be as short as 50 words or as long as 1500 words depending on its purpose. Your review will be written very much in the style of the book reviews found in the Los Angeles Times, which means you will need to do the following:



THE FIRST PARAGRAPH


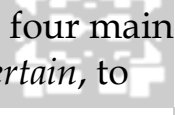



As when writing an essay or delivering a speech, you should begin your review with a sentence or opening paragraph designed to peak the interest of your readers and make them want to finish the rest of your critique. Try to write a creative introduction that will catch the audience off guard – an opening statement that will leave them smiling or wondering what the rest of the work contains. (Refer to the list of attention grabbing techniques accompanying these instructions.)

Use the introduction not only to attract your readers' attention, but to also give your audience an idea of your piece's focus. It should have a topic sentence (a sentence that states the subject or main idea of your work) and at least three supporting detail sentences. In other words, write an attention-grabbing introduction that includes your main idea and supporting information.

THE SECOND PARAGRAPH

Follow the introduction with a paragraph describing what you believe to be the function or purpose of the book. For what reason did the author create the work? What is it that the book is trying to accomplish? Was it written to inform, instruct, persuade or entertain? Is there something the author is trying to say or a message he or she wants to communicate? If the book was written as entertainment, in what way does it want to accomplish its task? Is it trying to scare its readers; make them laugh; take them on an adventure; or what?

Remember, everything that is written has an aim and a purpose. The **aim** is the message that is being communicated. For example, if you wrote a letter of thanks to your grandparents for the birthday gift they sent you, your aim (or message) would be to let them know how grateful you were. On the other hand, if you wrote a letter of complaint to the transit company because the bus arrived thirty minutes behind schedule and you were late for school, your aim (or message) would be to let them know how unhappy you were with their poor service.



The **purpose** is the reason for writing a piece. There are basically four main reasons an author might have for creating a written work: to *entertain*, to *persuade*, to *explain* or to *inform*.

- To **entertain** is to do something for other people's enjoyment or amusement.
- To **persuade** is to convince others to believe as you do, feel the same as you, agree with what you have to say, or do something you want them to do as a result of your having argued for or against it.
- To **explain** is to teach or instruct.
- To **inform** is to merely give or present information.

THE THIRD PARAGRAPH

In this section, a book review begins to somewhat resemble a typical book report, employing one or two paragraphs to state the piece's greatest strengths, followed later by its most glaring weaknesses. It is similar to the second paragraph in that it touches on the author's purpose for creating the work, but does so in a more expansive and critical manner, supporting the assertions made by providing detailed explanations for the positions taken.

In other words, the second paragraph states the author's intention or purpose for writing the book, whereas the third paragraph discusses whether or not the writer succeeded and, if so, how well or how poorly he or she was able to do so.

If the publication was written to entertain, did it succeed as intended? If so, how did it go about accomplishing this feat? If not, why, where and how did it fall short? If the book was written to inform, did it actually do a good job of educating the reader? If the book was written to instruct, was it clear, understandable, and on the mark?



THE FOURTH PARAGRAPH

While this section is labeled “Fourth Paragraph,” in practice, it is often several paragraphs long. This paragraph is where a book review is most like a traditional classroom book report. Here is where you explain – in detail – what the book is all about, describing its story or content using lots of examples and numerous excerpts. Though this section of a professional book review is usually several paragraphs long, your book review may be much bit shorter, that is, unless you are an extremely prolific young writer.

THE FINAL PARAGRAPH

Here we have the conclusion, your last opportunity to reach your audience with the message you wish to convey. A good conclusion also provides closure, establishing a sense of completion. Without closure, readers may feel confused and dissatisfied at the end of your work. Therefore, use the conclusion to signal that you are ready to finish so your audience will pay close attention to your final words.

Actually, a good conclusion performs three functions. First, it reinforces your central idea and shows how your major ideas fit together. Second, it provides closure (as was just stated). Third, it motivates your audience to take action. Often, a book review is intended to motivate the reader to either buy or avoid the publication that was just critiqued.

More specifically, the conclusion of a book review is used to repeat or reinforce the purpose of the book and to very briefly summarize how well or how poorly the publication met its goals. By using a brief but effective summary to review your major points and supporting details, you remind the audience of how these points lead to the central idea, keeping your readers’ attention focused on the issues you want to emphasize until the last moment.

Attention Grabbing Techniques

- **Startling Information**

A startling statement can immediately grab your audience's attention at the start of your piece. You might describe an extremely unusual situation, reveal a shocking statistic or vividly portray an alarming problem. Not only will your readers sit up and take notice, they will read carefully to find out more about what you just wrote and why you wrote it. Make sure however that the information is true and verifiable. Also, elaborate on it by following it with another sentence or two.

- **Interesting Fact**

Present an interesting fact related to the subject. (See "Startling Information.")

- **Paint a picture**

Use descriptive language to create a captivating image or images in the minds of your audience.

- **Anecdote**

An anecdote is a story that illustrates a point. Be sure your anecdote is short, to the point, and relevant to your topic. This can be a very effective opener for your composition, but use it carefully.

- **Dialogue**

An appropriate dialogue does not have to identify the speakers, but the reader must understand the point you are trying to convey. Use only two or three exchanges between speakers to make your point, and follow the dialogue with a sentence or two elaborating on what was said.



- **Summary Information**

A few sentences explaining your topic in general terms can lead the reader gently to your main idea. Each sentence should become gradually more specific, until you reach your “thesis.”

- **Humor**

Including something funny in your introduction can “break the ice,” helping to build rapport with your audience from the start. It can also serve to relax your readers while helping them remember your message. Keep in mind however that humor is not appropriate for every topic and too much humor can take the spotlight off of the main point you are trying to make.

- **Use a Quote**

Repeat a famous or interesting quote, writing something someone else said using their exact words.

- **Quote a Statistic**

Cite a statistic – give the results of a study, questionnaire or survey. (See “Startling Information.”)

- **Intriguing Question**

Try to get the readers involved right away by asking an interesting or intriguing question which leads to your central idea, drawing them in by stirring their curiosity. It may be in the form of a *rhetorical* question that is asked for effect rather than to elicit an actual answer, inviting audience members to think about the question silently and continue thinking about it throughout your composition.

Imagine Statement

By using an “imagine” statement, you place the reader in your shoes, making him for her more interested in what takes place in the rest of the essay. (The drawback is that its informality gives the essay a slightly hokey or corny tone, so be careful not to take it too far.)

Step 1: Character Development

OVERVIEW

Yesterday you watched the first in a series of educational videos in which Martha Alderson began to explain, step-by-step, how to pre-plot a narrative (how to plot out a story).

In the video, Ms. Alderson asked you to think of a character you would like to write about and decide what the character wants. In other words, ask yourself what is the character's goal? What is it the character is working or striving toward? Please write your answer to this question on the lines below:

Some examples mentioned by Ms. Alderson are listed below in case you need help in coming up with a possible long-term goal for your character.

EXAMPLE GOALS:

1. Make mischief
2. Become a wild thing
3. Make friends
4. Not have to go to school
5. Stop fighting
6. Save the family estate
7. Get back home to family

Step 2: Character Flaw

OVERVIEW

You recently watched the second in a series of educational videos in which Martha Alderson explains, step-by-step, how to pre-plot a narrative (how to plot out a story).

In the second video, Ms. Alderson talks about the desirability of having some type of transformation take place in the main character, or protagonist, between the beginning and end of the story – or if not a transformation, at least some type of change. To put it another way, you want the protagonist to “become a different person” because of the dramatic action that happens to that character.

The best way to accomplish this is through the use of a **character flaw**. Let there be something about the main character that actually works *against* that individual’s being able to reach his or her desired goal. What does the protagonist do that sabotages his or her getting what he or she wants?

For example, Ms. Alderson talks about a protagonist that wants his father’s respect, but he lies and cheats to get it, which is of course, a character flaw that deserves no respect whatsoever. She also discusses a character that is unable to stand up for himself, which gets in the way of his ability to forgive himself for a terrible thing he did.

As her last example, Ms. Alderson cites a protagonist that wants to find peace, but has a difficult time doing so because she is extremely critical of herself, seeing only those things that are wrong with her, and judging her behavior and her actions very harshly.

Try to come up with a flaw for the protagonist in your own story – one that will make it all the more difficult for the character to reach his or her ultimate goal – and record that flaw on the lines below.

Step 3: Initial Setting

OVERVIEW

You recently watched the third in a series of educational videos in which Martha Alderson explains, step-by-step, how to pre-plot a narrative (how to plot out a story).

In the third video, Ms. Alderson states that the next important step is to figure out the setting, which she breaks into two steps.

She starts at the beginning of the narrative. (*Keep in mind that there are three parts to virtually every good story: the beginning, the middle and the end.*) The beginning of a story demands certain elements, including a setting that is situated in “the ordinary world.” This is usually in terms of the physical setting, which is sometimes so important that it almost becomes another character in the story.

However, the setting can also be established in psychological terms, where something causes a noticeable change in the protagonist’s “state of mind.”

In either case, as the story begins, the setting introduces the protagonist and shows what his or her life is like before the main events start to happen – before everything “shifts.” This is because the main events or action in your story will be more dramatic if you give your readers something to compare it to.

So, your assignment for step three is to simply come up with the setting for the beginning of your story. Decide where you want your story to take place, physically, psychologically, or both. Come up with a description that includes a few authentic details. Then, in step four, you will begin to work on the second part of your setting.

Step 4: Medial Setting

OVERVIEW

When you completed the third lesson in this series on how to plan a story, you established the initial setting for your main character. You described your character's ordinary world, showing his or her life before the "action" in the story "takes off."

This original setting will make up the first quarter of your story. However, you are now ready to deal with the "middle setting," which will take up approximately one half of the narrative.

You see, in most stories there is movement in which the character starts in one location and moves to another. This is very critical for the development of the plot. So, for the middle setting you will transport your protagonist into an exotic world. However, that world does not necessarily have to be a new location in the physical sense (in terms of the external environment). Instead, it could be different in the internal or psychological sense. And of course, you could always choose to change the location in terms of both!

So in this section, catapult your protagonist into the actual "story world" where the main events begin to happen—where the energy of the story builds and there is conflict and excitement. No longer is your protagonist in his or her normal world with life moving along as it ordinarily does. There is some kind of incident that changes everything. As soon as this happens, your character is propelled into the story world.

Again, keep in mind that this world is not so much about a difference in physical location as it is a difference of circumstance(s). Your main character is thrown into some kind of situation that was previously foreign (completely unknown or unfamiliar) to him or her—a setting in which a brand new world opens up to that individual and the character learns something he or she did not know before.

