The Art and Practice of Writing Reviews

by Rayma Turton

Review means to 'see again'

Reviewing books is an exercise in a number of skills:
- comprehending
- precis
- skilful writing

all of which have been cumulating skills practiced throughout primary school, including verbally, as in the lower grades, or written as students' writing abilities develop.

In addition, as book reviewing is not conducted in a vacuum, it requires a knowledge of literature in order to place the book in the broader spectrum of writing.

For example:
- is it in a genre with specific attributes, for example, science fiction?
- are there existing books that cover the same topic better/differently?

School children have, probably unknowingly, been accumulating some of these skills as they have moved through the primary school curriculum from Year One onwards. However, they are addressed at more depth at Years 5, 7 and 9.

Keep in mind:
- A review is a result of the reviewer's experience and reaction to a book.
- Not everyone likes a book in the same way.
- Not everyone likes or dislikes a particular book.

Year Five:
Students create a range of imaginative, informative and persuasive types of texts including narratives, procedures, performances, reports, reviews, explanations and discussions.

Year Five Plan Australian Curriculum English https://www.australiancurriculum.edu.au

Year Seven:
Understand how language is used to evaluate texts and how evaluations about a text can be substantiated by reference to the text and other sources.
(ACELA1782 and In elaborations)

- defending points of view in reading circle discussions.
- responding to points of view by developing and elaborating on others’ responses.
- building a knowledge base about words of evaluation, including words to express emotional responses to texts, judgment of characters and their actions, and appreciation of the aesthetic qualities of text as well as learning about the structure of the book or film review and how it moves from text description to text summary and then to a text judgment.

Year Nine:
Students create a range of imaginative, informative and persuasive types of texts including narratives, procedures, performances, reports, discussions, literary analyses, transformations of texts and reviews.


Note: As the practice of writing reviews is undertaken at a number of levels throughout the school, the following is a generalised approach to reviewing that can be used selectively according to the class.

BEFORE STARTING TO REVIEW

Look at a number of different reviews from different sources. For example:

- Newspapers that have a daily children's section, that have educational sections on specific days, that allocate space to junior reviewers.
- Magazines that are aimed at children and young adults.

In groups conduct an examination of each book:
- Do they have space allocated for reviews?
- If so, what type of book do they tend to review?
- Adventure? Books that reflect the lifestyles of teenagers? Children?
- Reviews about books that feature modern culture?

Discuss:
- Which reviews made you want to read the book reviewed?
- Why?
- Which reviews convinced you not to read the book?
- Why?

Note that a number of reviews in newspapers and magazines use a star system as an indication of how well the reviewer thinks the book, movie or TV programme being discussed has been written/presented.

- Is this useful?
- Why?

Look for websites that encourage young readers to post their reviews.
- Do you find them interesting?
- Do they make you want to read the book OR definitely not want to read the book?

Discuss: THE RESPONSIBILITIES OF A REVIEWER

The author has spent a lot of time (as has the publisher) in writing and producing a book and deserves to have it treated with respect.

At the same time:

The reader of a review has a claim for the reviewer to present them with a clear and honest opinion of a book.

So if you don't like a book look at the reason why:
- You don't like that sort of story.
- You don't like the way it is written.
Likewise, if you enjoy a book ask yourself why:
Therefore a reviewer should:

- Read the book carefully and with an open mind.
- Remember it is not the purpose of a review to destroy an author or a book.
- Try to make it sound better than it is.
- Try not to use the review to show how clever you, the reviewer, is.
- Convey the story line and theme fairly and assess how well the author has achieved this.
- Do not make statements you cannot back-up.
- Indicate your response to a book. If you don't like a book, make sure that you aren't swayed by the fact that you don't usually enjoy that type of book or that you have prejudged the book because you haven't enjoyed previously published books by the author. If you cannot put aside your prejudice pass the book onto another reviewer.
- Above all, be honest and fair!

SETTING OUT TO PRODUCE A CLASS REVIEWING MAGAZINE

Perhaps best to divide the magazine into sections so that groups, or at least pairs of students, work together on a review in order to encourage discussion and learn to respect a different viewpoint. Each group will review a specific novel, picture book and/or a nonfiction text. Provide enough copies for each group to access when needed.

DEFINE YOUR AUDIENCE:

For example:

- contemporaries in the classroom
- students in the school
- teachers and parents
- general readership

HOW WILL THE REVIEWS BE MADE ACCESSIBLE TO THE AUDIENCE?

Suggest a number of different options and explore the practicalities of each. For example:

- Display on a notice board inside/outside the library or classroom
- Printed in a school newspaper
- Published as part of a library reviewing journal published once a term by participating classrooms
- Could one review be chosen weekly/monthly to be printed in the P&C newsletter?
- Would the local library place reviews on their notice board?
- Would a local newspaper make a section of their publication available for reviews of children's books by children?
- Post reviews on one of the web sites that encourage participation, for example, Amazon.

WHAT IS A REVIEW?

What exactly is a review? What is its use? Who reads reviews? What is the difference between an annotation and a review?
DISCUSS THE REVIEWING PROCESS

Look at a number of different reviews.

For example:
- Reviews of movies in the newspapers where they often use a star system as an indication of the reviewer's assessment of the movie.
- A number of reviewing journals use the same indicator to highlight books they think stand out as examples of their genre or for a particular age group.
- Collect and keep the winning reviews of the various young writers competitions among Australia.
- Check out reviews by young writers on various web sites.

Discuss which reviews the students think are best and why:

Some questions/points to make:
- Does the review make you want to read the book? Why?
- Does the review convince you this is not a book that will interest you? Why?
- Was the review itself interesting to read? If it was, why?
- If it was the way in which it was written, ask the following questions:
  - Did you enjoy the choice of words used by the reviewer?
  - Did any sentences/phrases stand out for you?
  - Was the logical/make sense?
  - Were there any unnecessary repetitions?

Things to be decided before beginning to read and review:

DEVELOP A 'HOUSE STYLE' FOR PUBLISHING REVIEWS

This involves deciding:
- The maximum number of words allowed for a review—although keep in mind that:
  - NOT ALL REVIEWS NEED TO BE THE SAME LENGTH.
  - SOME BOOKS WILL NEED MORE SPACE THAN OTHERS, SOME LESS.
- Are you going to employ a 'star' system (the practice of adding a star rating to a book review)? If so develop a policy of what qualifies a book needs to have in order to award a star/stars:
  - Will it be the use of a star to call attention to the book.
  - OR.
  - Will it be a system of marking a book on a scale of no stars to 5?
- The UK reviewing journal Books for Keeps uses this system with a helpful guide as to exactly what is conveyed by the number of starts.
  - For example:
    - Unmissable ***** / Very Good **** / Good *** / Fair ** / Poor *
- How will you lay-out each review, including the format for bibliographic details*.
- Discuss the various aspects of books you need to be aware of in order to prepare a comprehensive review.

* Bibliographic details for Books: author(s)/editor(s) of the book, year of publication, book title, edition, place of publication, publisher, number of pages.
Make sure the role of the editor/editorial group is explored and defined:
For example:
The editor should not change a reviewer's assessment of a book.
The editor checks for accuracy, spelling, grammar and deems if the length of the review is acceptable.
The editor can ask the reviewer to explain what they mean if something is unclear.

Divide the class into groups:
Each group will review a specific novel, picture book and/or nonfiction text.
Provide enough copies for each group to be able to access the book when needed.

READING BEFORE WRITING A REVIEW:

First Reading
Read the story just for the pleasure/interest it engenders. It is a way of emotionally 'responding' to the story as a whole before looking at the various aspects of the book that combine to make it engaging or not.

Second Reading
Reading for understanding the way in which the story works (or doesn't).

In groups discuss the story
- What is the story about?
- What is the trajectory of the story line?
- How is it told?
- Do the illustrations help the story? How?
- Look very closely as to how the illustrations have been made and discuss the craftsmanship of the artist and whether or not you think the art style is suited to the story it is illustrating.
- Make notes as you go along.

PREPARING TO REVIEW:

Discuss the various aspects of a book you will need to be aware of in order to prepare a comprehensive review:
For example: What Type of book is it?
Nonfiction; novel; picture book; comic (graphic novel) etc.
Do text and illustrations work together?
Is the story engaging?
Which Genre is it in? ... Fairy tale? Allegory? Genres are tricky things: not everyone agrees as to which categories of books are genres or not. As a general rule, think of a genre as a group of books that share common characteristics. For example, books that depend on lots of physical things happening (adventure); that are told in a special way (for instance a diary) that present a specific wisdom or moral (fable) that are set in other worlds (fantasy or science fiction).
See list of genres on p.9

How does the plot unfold:
Is the story told consecutively (a linear narrative) or does the story have more than one plot line, each one following different narratives; or does it move back in time in flashbacks?

Characters:
Give a short description of each of the main characters. You could note whether or not you feel they seem like real people or are merely stereotypes or one-dimensional characters. That is, their character is not capable of a range of skills and emotions, whereas most real people are complex with various strengths and weaknesses and the capacity, if needed, to change.

What is the tone of the book: Is it funny? serious? sad?

Point of view and or focaliser:
In some novels, irrespective of whether the narrative is in the first or third person, all of the action is focalised through one character. In others the focaliser varies from scene to scene or chapter to chapter. To distinguish between the narrative and the focaliser, ask yourself, who's telling the story?

Point of view refers to the narrator of the story and how s/he tells the story.
Of course all fiction is a story, and writers choose whether they will tell the story directly to the reader or tell it through the point-of-view of a character or characters.
If the character tells the story directly to the reader in their own words it is said to be a first person narrative. (For example, The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time which is told entirely from the point-of-view of the main character, Christopher, and in his own words.)
The writer could also decide to tell the story from a character's point of view but tells the story on their behalf thus making it a third person narrative. Or it could be from the writer's point of view as if he or she were looking down on the action and seeing everything (an omniscient narrator).

Theme:
What is it about rather than just the plot; the larger meanings that lie beneath the story's surface. For example, the plot of Fox by Margaret Wild and Ron Brooks involves a fox luring a magpie away from his friend, Dog, but the themes of the story are that of friendship and jealousy.

Setting:
Where the story takes place and when the story takes place. It may be a real place like the goldfields in NSW, or a non-specific place like the mountains or by the sea; or an imaginary world like Middle Earth, or Narnia where the characters move between the real world and an imaginary one. It may be a real place at the present time or in another time, in the past (or future) like The Long Walk by Kerry Greenwood.

Style:
Style is tricky. Style is the way in which a writer puts his thoughts into words and his words into sentences, phrases, paragraphs and chapters. There is no 'best' style. All we can comment on is whether the style the author has chosen to write in suits the plot, the theme, the characters, the dialogue and whether or not it fits the mood the author is trying to create. Sometimes reading a section and a handful helps to identify the style in which a story is told.

BOOKS THAT REQUIRE ADDITIONAL/DIFFERENT APPROACHES TO ALL THE ABOVE

PICTURE BOOKS:
Varied in themes, story and illustrations, picture books provide an experience of language and art for children from a very early age. They can be read to a child by an adult or by an older literate child and in doing so help children develop a vocabulary beyond what they may encounter in everyday conversation.
Obviously the illustrations play a large part in the telling of the story.
- Do they help `explain' and enhance the story?
- Are they suitable for the story? Do they reflect the tone of the story?
For example, older students could look at Michael Rosen's Sad Book and discuss how the illustrations work with the text
OR
Ron Brooks illustrations for Fox OR Bob Graham's A Bus Called Heaven.
• Are the illustrations integral to the text? That is, do they supply aspects of the story line that are not actually written in the text yet are important in setting the scene or extending the text?

• Is the text engaging? Does it hold the attention of its 'reader'? Does it encourage retelling?

• Is the 'style' of the illustrations suitable for the story? For example, look at the board book Triangle. A simple pictorial story focusing on shapes set against a white background with no human in sight yet unequivocally human, involving a near tricks played on a friend. Note that the book is in the format of a board book but has a wider readership than that implies.

NONFICTION

Books that contain information about something that exists or existed. It includes biographies; histories; nature studies; books about the world around us; science; economics; history... In fact, all stories and books that deal with 'real' things: look at your library's catalog to see the range of books that come under the umbrella of the term 'nonfiction'. To see what the term encompasses, look at a list of subjects in the Dewey Decimal system.

Note that knowledge and information are dispensed by various books including, for example, fictional stories that are based around true events or facts. A number of books dispense knowledge by presenting it in a fictional narrative; for example, Trace Ball's Rivertime and Rockhopping are both wonderful introductions to the variety of life encountered on a trip down the Gomelg River (Rivertime) and a trek in the Grampians/Garriwerd (Rockhopping). The fiction in is that the characters are fictional, as is the framing trip. Rollyn Beld Archit (pp.16) introduces the reader to the various architectural 'shapes' that have underpinned many a famous building. Note these books are treated as fiction because of the elements of fiction within them.

ASSESSING NONFICTION

Need to check:

Factual accuracy

This is difficult to check unless you are an expert in the field. Most up-to-date encyclopedias would be a helpful place to start. Do the photographs and illustrations unless historical, reflect current society? Is the information conveyed in a clear and appropriate way and the language used is suitable for the intended age group.

How up-to-date?

Depending on the subject some books have a longer life than others but given the pace of change in the world, all new purchases need to be assessed for current accuracy. Check that statistics are dated, photographs are properly labelled.

Be aware of stereotypes and omissions

For example, the fact that in today's world some nurses are males, some doctors are females; women are often involved in fire-fighting groups ...

Format

Everything to do with the 'look' of a book depends on its format. In effect, the decisions made by the book designer:

Size and shape of the book
Paperback or hard cover
Internal paper stock
Front and end papers
Dust jacket (if there is one)