



## Write an Exhibition Review

## CULMINATING LESSON

### SUGGESTED INSTRUCTIONAL STRATEGY

This activity is designed to follow your Chicago History Museum field trip. Students will write an exhibition review of *Abraham Lincoln Transformed* or *Benito Juárez and the Making of Modern Mexico* and post their comments on the Museum's website.

Begin by discussing the purpose and qualities of a review. Supply samples or ask students to bring in a review of a movie, book, music release, or museum exhibition. Read the samples, analyze the techniques used by reviewers, and discuss what makes some of the reviews more useful than others. You may also review the excerpts from Jonathan Deamer's "The 10 secrets of writing reviews that will keep readers coming back" (attached to this lesson). Based on this discussion, create a class top 10 list of how to write an effective review.

Recap your visit to the Museum. Play the history soundscapes and refer to students' completed audio experience worksheets. Make a list of the most memorable features of the visit, both good and bad; you may want to split your notes by exhibition. Organize the students' reactions into categories that will help them craft their reviews, such as most surprising, most interesting, I'd tell a friend about this, must see, must do, advice for other visitors, or advice for the Museum.

*The instructional strategy continues on page 2.*

### SUGGESTED RESOURCES

- Excerpts from "The 10 secrets of writing reviews that will keep readers coming back" by Jonathan Deamer (available in the attached handout)
- Audio experience worksheet  
[www.chicagohistory.org/lincolnjuarezaudio](http://www.chicagohistory.org/lincolnjuarezaudio)
- History soundscapes  
[www.chicagohistory.org/lincolnjuarezaudio](http://www.chicagohistory.org/lincolnjuarezaudio)
- Online exhibition review activity  
[www.chicagohistory.org/exhibitionreview](http://www.chicagohistory.org/exhibitionreview)

### ILLINOIS STATE LEARNING STANDARDS

#### English Language Arts

Goal 3: Write to communicate for a variety of purposes.

Goal 4: Listen and speak effectively in a variety of situations.

Goal 5: Use the language arts to acquire, assess, and communicate information.

#### Social Science

Goal 16: Understand events, trends, individuals, and movements shaping the history of Illinois, the United States, and other nations.

## Write an Exhibition Review

### **SUGGESTED INSTRUCTIONAL STRATEGY (continued)**

Ask students to choose one exhibition to review, and give them time to draft their reviews. The online activity has a character limit of 750 including spaces; this is about 10 to 12 sentences. You may wish to assign longer, more in-depth reviews and ask students to choose excerpts to post online. Each review should include a rating of up to 4 stars (4 = excellent, 3 = good, 2 = okay, 1 = did not like) and an explanation of the rating. Ask students to exchange their drafts and critique one another, using the class's top 10 list to assess effectiveness. Allow time for revisions.

Post the reviews at **[www.chicagohistory.org/exhibitionreview](http://www.chicagohistory.org/exhibitionreview)**. The activity asks each reviewer to enter his/her first name and grade, give the exhibition up to 4 stars, and provide a review that explains the star rating.

# Excerpts from “The 10 secrets of writing reviews that will keep readers coming back”

By Jonathan Deamer



. . . I’ve been reviewing music for ages, and I always try to stick to these 10 rules. Although they’re from a music journalism point of view, they’ll work for most subjects . . . whether it’s reviewing books, movies, software, or something different altogether.

## **1. Ask yourself, “What does the reader want to know?”**

This is the most important thing to remember when writing a review. You can craft the wittiest prose with the cleverest metaphors, but unless the reader finds out what they want to know, you’ve not done your job as a reviewer. Think of the sort of questions they’re likely to be asking themselves . . . Find that one question, and make the sole aim of your article to answer it.

## **2. Decide on the overall point you want to get across to the reader.**

. . . you’ll no doubt have a whole ream of opinions, both good and bad . . . All those viewpoints can get confusing, so simplify it. Decide on an overall basic opinion . . . and use that as a framework for your review. Hang everything else off this one idea . . . You can get all your points across, but just relate them all to this central theme (in conjunction with number 1 above) . . .

## **3. Be ruthless when editing—don’t be precious about your “art.”**

If it doesn’t help you answer the reader’s question (point number 1, above) or isn’t directly conducive to getting your main point across (number 2), then get rid of it! You might be really proud of a line you’ve written, but unless it helps the review as a whole it’s no good . . .

## **4. Don’t write about yourself; it’s about the band, book, movie, or whatever you’re reviewing.**

A classic novice’s mistake this one . . . As we’ve said already, reviewers want to know about the product and that should be what you concentrate on . . . By all means stamp a bit of your personality and thoughts on the review but stick to the subject matter; the reader shouldn’t really know the reviewer is there. A good rule of thumb is to try not to say “I” at all.

## **5. Ask yourself, “What makes my review unique?”**

. . . think about having a “unique selling point”—something that your review can offer that people won’t be able to find elsewhere. Do you manage to bring a humorous slant to it? Do you have a specific or rare expertise . . . ? Is your opinion vastly different to that of everyone else? Have you managed to be the first one to review something? Whatever you decide your unique selling point is, make sure you emphasise it! . . .

Continued . . .

**6. You don't always need to be a smart alek—sometimes it's better to write as if you're chatting to your friends.**

Writing like a smart alek is something I must admit to being (very!) guilty of at times. It can be very tempting to get wrapped up in metaphors and tie yourself in linguistic knots. While this may make you feel like Charles Dickens, often it can just confuse the reader.

**7. Compare to other similar products—but not too much!**

One of the advantages of being an expert in your field is that you can place a new release in context—is it better or worse than the author's previous work, are there other better alternatives in a similar genre, and so on. This is something it's definitely worth doing if you don't already, as it can lend your writing an air of expertise and authority. The thing to remember though is not to do it too much, as it's easy to end up writing more about other products than the one you're meant to be reviewing.

**8. Strong quotable sentences are great, but let them come naturally.**

One of the best ways to learn to write good reviews is to read professional ones, and try to imitate them. What bits of their style do you like? What ideas can you borrow? One of the dangers of this though is that you can easily write reviews full of the sort of phrases that appear on movie posters—“*a rip-roaring thrill ride for all the family!*” Needless to say, clichés like that should be avoided at all costs. And even if they're not clichés, such sentences can often be superficial. So don't go looking for them. If they genuinely serve a purpose and help you say what you want to say, then great . . .

**9. Be specific!**

Used in conjunction with the tips on comparison (above) and stating the obvious (below), this can be one of the things that really makes your review a resource that people are going to return to months, or even years, after you've written it . . . Just ask yourself, “What was unique about my experience?” This stops your reviews committing the cardinal sin of reading like a press-release, and as long as you don't start telling boring personal anecdotes . . . you'll be fine!

**10. Don't be afraid to state the obvious.**

. . . don't underestimate how little your reader may actually know about the subject. There's no need to give a full life story, but a bit of background info is always good . . .



Source: Johnathan Deamer's full posting appeared at <http://jonathandeamer.com/2007/06/12/how-to-write-great-reviews/> and was accessed on September 18, 2009.