

Dear future critic,

How do you write a review? Well, you need some critical talent and the ability to string a sentence together, but you also need to write to 'house style'. That means following a brief, like this one. It's similar to the rubric at the top of the exam paper and contains useful guidance on how many words to write, what those words should tell the reader and which other information we need you to supply with your review. So...

What should you write?

250 words. Not more, and no less than 240. That's just your body (main) copy. This doesn't include the verdict, star rating or cast details (all of which we'll come to later).

As much as is possible, reviews for The Stage should be objective. Obviously, personal opinion has a place to some extent, but we should be judging shows on their own merits. For example, Mamma Mia! could be a superb example of a jukebox show even if you don't like Abba's music. Or, you might love The Crucible, but if a revival is mediocre in terms of other stagings then we should judge it as such.

Think of reviews for The Stage being punditry as much as they are reviews. Follow an industry angle. Don't focus on plot (unless it's a premiere) but mention how the show fits into the theatre's current season/artistic policy, comment on the director's previous work and the future prospects of a show. Could it transfer or tour? Would it work abroad? That sort of thing.

If you read back your review and feel it could have appeared in any other publication then the angle will almost certainly not be industry-focused enough.

All reviews must be written in the present tense.

Describe performances – if an actor is good or bad explain why. Talk about the production design and directing choices. What do they aim to achieve? Are they successful?

Try not to use words such as delightful, brilliant etc too often. Make the small number of words you have work hard.

Double check that all names are spelled correctly. Check against the programme and search Google. Also check that names are consistent. If someone's name is spelled in two different ways, at least one of them is wrong.

Write in paragraphs.

Use one space between sentences after the full stop.

Avoid cliches.

Always put your byline (the name under which you would like to be published) at the end of the review.

Now what?

We include star ratings with every review. These will be from one to five stars. You, as the critic, decide the star rating.

You will need to provide a 10-20 word summary of your review. Please note: 20 words is an absolute maximum.

Guidance on star ratings:

- 1 star – This is an appalling example of a show of its type, it fails on every or nearly every level
- 2 star – This is a below average example of a show of its type
- 3 star – This is an average to good example of a show of its type
- 4 star – This is a very good example of a show of its type
- 5 star – This is a truly superb example of a show of its type, among the best that have ever been produced.

Please use 1* and 5* ratings frugally. The vast majority of shows are 2* to 4*, 1* is for something really dreadful and 5* for something really special. It would be perfectly possible for a reviewer to give no 1* or 5* reviews in an entire year.

It would be reasonable to give 5* to a show you personally didn't enjoy but felt was the best example of its kind, but 4* to a show that you enjoyed more but felt was not the best of its kind.

Guidance on summaries:

For Peter and Alice, the summary might be: "Disappointing new play, lifted by central performances of Judi Dench and Ben Whishaw" or Stephen Ward might be: "Latest Lloyd Webber musical falls flat, despite sumptuous score". You can find more of these on The Stage website. Remember, no more than 20 words.

What about the cast and crew?

All this information will be provided in the programme. Please note: this information has to come from the reviewer, as we will not necessarily have access to a programme. If you cannot find it in the programme, please refer to the show's website. Major commercial productions will tend to have all of the above roles, whereas a fringe production might only have one or two. It is better to provide too much information than too little.

Type of show (eg. theatre, dance, opera)
Title
Venue
Dates (start date, end date and press night. Format is Month DD)
Author(s)
Director
Design
Technical
Cast includes (more is better, but don't list eg. chorus line)
Producer(s)
Running time (the exact time, including interval, written as hrs and mins)

For example

Peter and Alice
Noel Coward Theatre, London
March 9-June 1, PN March 25
Author: John Logan
Director: Michael Grandage
Design: Christopher Oram (set and costume), Paule Constable (lighting), Adam Cork (sound)
Technical: Toby Whale (casting); Paul Handley (production); Sophie Gabszewicz (company stage manager); Tim Gradwell (wardrobe); Gemma Flaherty (wigs and make-up)
Cast: Judi Dench, Ben Whishaw, Olly Alexander, Ruby Bentall, Stefano Braschi, Nicholas Farrell, Derek Riddell
Producer: Michael Grandage Company
Running time: 1hr 20mins

Musicals still come under this heading but on author line add book, music, lyrics in brackets.
Add musical director and choreographer.

Title
Venue
Dates
Authors (book), (music), (lyrics)
Director
Design
Musical director
Choreographer
Technical
Cast includes
Producer
Running time (hrs, mins)

Dance

Replace author with composer, add choreographer, if no director add artistic director. If same person does various jobs add info on one line.

Opera

Replace author with composer, add conductor, add librettist in brackets under composer.

Deadline

Kind of a biggie, this. Don't miss the deadline or you will end up on the editor's spike (not personally, just the sheet of paper with your review on it). The deadline is noon on May 29, 2015.

ENDS (<-- you should write this at the bottom of your document, so we know you've finished)

Good luck from everyone on The Stage Critic Search team