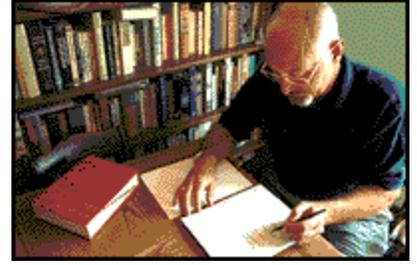


Book Review Writing Tips from Rodman Philbrick

Here's a review I wrote about one of my favorite books, *To Kill a Mockingbird* by Harper Lee. Read my review, and try using it as a model as you begin thinking about your own book review.

To Kill a Mockingbird
by Harper Lee
Review by Rodman Philbrick



I've never been to Alabama, but novelist Harper Lee made me feel as if I had been there in the long, hot summer of 1935, when a lawyer named Atticus Finch decided to defend an innocent black man accused of a horrible crime. The story of how the whole town reacted to the trial is told by the lawyer's daughter, Scout, who remembers exactly what it was like to be eight years old in 1935, in Maycomb, Alabama.

Scout is the reason I loved this book, because her voice rings so clear and true. Not only does she make me see the things she sees, she makes me feel the things she feels. There's a lot more going on than just the trial, and Scout tells you all about it.

A man called Boo Radley lives next door. Very few people have ever seen Boo, and Scout and her friends have a lot of fun telling scary stories about him. The mystery about Boo Radley is just one of the reasons you want to keep turning the pages to find out what happens in *To Kill a Mockingbird*.

Scout and her big brother, Jem, run wild and play games and have a great time while their father is busy with the trial. One of their friends is a strange boy called Dill. Actually Dill isn't really so strange once you get to know him. He says things like "I'm little but I'm old," which is funny but also pretty sad, because some of the time Dill acts more like a little old man than a seven-year-old boy.

To Kill a Mockingbird is filled with interesting characters like Dill, and Scout makes them all seem just as real as the people in your own hometown. Here's how Scout describes Miss Caroline, who wore a red-striped dress: "She looked and smelled like a peppermint drop."

Dill and Boo and Jem are all fascinating, but the most important character in the book is Scout's father, Atticus Finch. You get the idea that Scout is writing the story down because she wants the world to know what a good man her dad was, and how hard he tried to do the right thing, even though the deck was stacked against him.

The larger theme of the story is about racial intolerance, but Scout never tries to make it a "lesson," it's simply part of the world she describes. That's why *To Kill a Mockingbird* rings true, and why it all seems so real.

The trial of the wrongly accused Tom Robinson takes place during the time of segregation, when black people were not allowed to socialize with white people. In that era, when a white man said a black man committed a crime, the black man was presumed to be guilty. The law required that they have a trial, but everybody knew the defendant was going to be convicted.

Atticus Finch, the quiet hero of the book, tries to persuade the jury that bigotry is wrong. His words are eloquent and heartfelt. He demonstrates that Tom Robinson couldn't possibly have assaulted the victim. Atticus even reveals the identity of the real villain, which enrages a very dangerous enemy. This act of courage endangers not only Atticus Finch but his family as well. They become the target of hate mongers and bigots.

Even though the story took place many years ago, you get the idea that parts of it could happen today, in any town where people distrust and fear each other's differences.

In a just world an innocent man should be found not guilty. But if you want to know what this particular jury finally decides and what happens to Scout and Jem and Dill and Boo Radley and the rest of the people who live and breathe in *To Kill a Mockingbird*, you'll have to read the book!

Here are a few tips that I've found helpful when I sit down to write about a book. Give them a try!

1. Before you begin writing, make a few notes about the points you want to get across.
2. *While you're writing, try thinking of your reader as a friend to whom you're telling a story.*
3. Try to mention the name of the author and the book title in the **first** paragraph — there's nothing more frustrating than reading a review of a great book but not knowing who wrote it and what the title is!
4. If possible, **use one paragraph for each point** you want to make about the book. It's a good way to emphasize the importance of the point. *You might want to list the main points in your notes before you begin.*
5. Try to get the main theme of the book across in the beginning of your review. **Your reader should know right away what he or she is getting into should they choose to read the book!**
6. Think about whether the book is part of a genre. Does the book fit into a type like mystery, adventure, or romance? What aspects of the genre does it use?
7. What do you like or dislike about the book's writing style? Is it funny? Does it give you a sense of the place it's set? What is the author's/narrator's "voice" like?
8. **Try using a few short quotes from the book to illustrate your points.** This is not absolutely necessary, but it's a good way to give your reader a sense of the author's writing style.
9. Make sure your review explains how you feel about the book and why, not just what the book is about. **A good review should express the reviewer's opinion and persuade the reader to share it, to read the book, or to avoid reading it.**
10. Do research about the author and incorporate what you learn into the review. Biographical information can help you formulate your opinion about the book, and gives your review a "depth." Remember, a book doesn't come directly from a printing press, it's a product of an author's mind, and therefore it may be helpful to know something about the author and how she or he came to write the book. For instance, a little research will reveal the following about author Harper Lee:
 - o *To Kill a Mockingbird*, which won the Pulitzer Prize, is the only book she's ever published.
 - o The town she called Maycomb is really Monroeville, Alabama. Many of the residents thought the author had betrayed them by writing the book.
 - o Some people think she based the character Dill on Truman Capote, a famous writer who was her childhood friend.

Plot

Give your reader a taste of the plot, but DO NOT give the surprises away.

Readers want to know enough about what happens in a book to know whether they will find it interesting, but they never want to know the ending. Summarize the plot in a way that will answer some questions about the book, but leave other questions in the reader's mind. You may want to make a list of questions about the book before you begin.

Exposition:

Rising Action (including conflict):

Climax:

Falling Action:

Resolution:

You are ready to write a first draft of your review! Take these elements and weave them together into a complete review. When you are finished with the first draft, move on to the revision process.

Now that you've completed the challenges and written your first draft, it's time to begin revising. As many published writers will tell you, rewriting is one of the most important parts of writing anything — from book reviews to actual books! These guidelines will help you prepare the second version of your review.

1. Check back through the writing tips and make sure you've incorporated as many of the suggestions as possible.
2. Read through each paragraph and make sure the main point is clear. For instance, the point of one of your paragraphs might be to describe the book's main character. As you read that paragraph, make sure that it gets across what you most want to say about the character. That way, the character will be vivid in your reader's mind.
3. If a sentence or paragraph seems awkward or unclear, it has to be rewritten — and rewriting is what separates good writing from bad. Begin by trying to simplify. Here's an example of an awkward or unclear sentence:

Boo Radley is this mysterious man that lives next door to where Scout lives, and she and her friends tell stories that are scary about Boo, except they don't really know much about him, which is one of the reasons *To Kill a Mockingbird* is so suspenseful.

Let's break these thoughts up into three clearly defined sentences that stand alone as a paragraph:

A man called Boo Radley lives next door. Very few people have ever seen Boo, and Scout and her friends have a lot of fun telling scary stories about him. The mystery about Boo Radley is just one of the reasons you want to keep turning the pages to find out what happens in *To Kill a Mockingbird*.

4. Check to make sure you're not repeating yourself. (This can be easy to do when you're trying to get an important point across!) Make sure you state your main points clearly and emphatically. Then explain *why* the point is important, instead of saying it again. Repetitive writing makes for dull reading.

Now that you have revised your book review, you are ready for the final step:

Publish!