

Guide to form – Reviews

If I can write in any form, which should I choose? This is the question we are most often asked. There is no ‘better’ or ‘worse’ form but the brief notes below may help you decide.

A **review** looks at the strengths and weaknesses of a piece of art, in any form. You could review another piece of writing, for example a book or short story, or another art form which involves creative writing, such as a play, a film, a video game, or a music album. Or the art form you are reviewing might not involve words at all, or may only use writing in a small way – like a piece of visual art, an exhibition, or music without any lyrics.

It’s important to think critically when writing your review – even if you really love the thing you are reviewing, try to delve into *why* it works, who else it might appeal to and why, and any aspects which it could do better.

Reviews aren’t just a list of strengths and weaknesses, however. They can also be an art form in themselves in how they are written, as they foreground the writer’s own voice and opinions. They can make use of humour, while also drawing on context around the artwork itself, to make larger social or political points. And remember to keep your review focused on the theme of ‘Home’.

Orwell himself wrote many reviews. In his essay on the poet W. B. Yeats, which is also a review of the book *The Development of William Butler Yeats* by V. K. Narayana Menon, he examines Yeats’ politics as well as his poetry:

*Translated into political terms, Yeats’s tendency is Fascist. Throughout most of his life, and long before Fascism was ever heard of, he had had the outlook of those who reach Fascism by the aristocratic route. He is a great hater of democracy, of the modern world, science, machinery, the concept of progress — above all, of the idea of human equality. Much of the imagery of his work is feudal, and it is clear that he was not altogether free from ordinary snobbishness... Not much interested in politics, and no doubt disgusted by his brief incursions into public life, Yeats nevertheless makes political pronouncements. He is too big a man to share the illusions of Liberalism, and as early as 1920 he foretells in a justly famous passage (*The Second Coming*) the kind of world that we have actually moved into.*

There is also humour and lightness of touch in other review pieces, including this essay on *Boys’ Weeklies*:

Needless to say, these stories are fantastically unlike life at a real public school. They run in cycles of rather differing types, but in general they are the clean-fun, knock-about type of story, with interest centring round horseplay, practical jokes, ragging masters, fights, canings, football, cricket and food. A constantly recurring story is one in which a boy is accused of some misdeed committed by another and is too much of a sportsman to reveal the truth. The ‘good’ boys are ‘good’ in the clean-living Englishman tradition — they keep in hard training, wash behind their ears, never hit below the belt etc., etc., — and by way of contrast there is a series of ‘bad’ boys, Racke, Croke, Loder and others, whose badness consists in betting, smoking cigarettes and frequenting public-houses. All these boys are constantly on the verge of expulsion, but as it would mean a change of personnel if any boy were actually expelled, no one is ever caught out in any really serious offence.