

The Review Essay

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Good writers read and get to know the texts of their genre and peers. Great writers engage with the work of their colleagues and track trends, changes, or important conversations happening in the writing community. An excellent way to take part in this conversation is to write (and publish) a review essay.

Review essays consider a number of books at once. They can proceed thematically (a reading of 3 books on the Holocaust; a consideration of race, gender, sexual identity; survivor narratives; travel writing) or temporally (the “best” books of 2016) or formally (the list, hermit crab essay, fragments, flash CNF, found material, the lyric essay, the use of white space, section breaks, non-linear CNF, narratives told in reverse, film essays, audio essays, and so on...). Whatever you do, choose carefully and deliberately.

Tip: if you choose to include a newly published book or two in your trio, you will have a better chance of placing the essay for publication. It's also a good idea to revisit a text that may have been unjustly overlooked or forgotten. Remember that your readers are looking to learn something new.

Important: A review essay is not a strictly academic or scholarly essay. Rather, we're aiming for the smart, reflective, yet conversational tone of publications like *Creative Nonfiction*, *Assay*, *The Writers' Chronicle*, and *Fourth Genre*. I encourage you to browse these and other publications (like the *LARB – Los Angeles Review of Books*) for examples of successful review essays. I also encourage you to share such examples with your peers.

As you write think both broadly and specifically. Describe your texts vividly in such a way that will make your readers want to read those books too. Explain why these texts are important or interesting. Use concrete examples (citations) to back up your claims. Be deliberate in your choice of quotes. A review essay is not simply a string of examples pulled from the book. You need to think, dialogue with the text, and engage with it.

You may want to frame your essay in a personal way. Perhaps you are trying to work out a problem in your writing and these texts are helping you do so. This was the case for me when I wrote my review essay called: “In Praise of Slim Volumes: Big Book, Big Evil.” I've included a link to that review essay for you as an example: <http://www.assayjournal.com/julija-sukys-in-praise-of-slim-volumes-big-book-big-evil-31.html>. My essay grew out of anxieties about and an interest in very short (>30,000) CNF books.

One way to tackle this task is:

- ...first, to pinpoint your own writerly anxiety or interest
- ...second, formulate that anxiety or interest as a question

...start reading in an attempt to answer that question, at least provisionally (you will likely find that reading beyond your chosen 3 core texts helps you move things forward – consider consulting academic journals, book reviews, craft essays, *New Yorker* or *Harper's* pieces, and so on)

Questions to think about as you write:

- 1) What feature unifies your three chosen texts? What do all three writers/texts have in common?
- 2) How do these three texts differ, in terms of structure, voice, theme, approach?
- 3) How are structure and content related in these pieces?
- 4) What is at stake? What have you learned by reading these texts side-by-side? What might the reader of your essay learn if s/he picked up the same books?
- 5) How does this or might this investigation relate to your creative and intellectual work?
- 6) What did you notice by juxtaposing these texts?
- 7) What questions remain?
- 8) What might another reader gain by reading these texts?

Happy writing!