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**The Reel Deal -  
Writing About  
Movies**

**Betty Jo Tucker**

**THE REEL DEAL:  
WRITING ABOUT MOVIES**

**Instructor: Betty Jo Tucker**

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## INTRODUCTION

**“In the arts, the critic is the only independent source of information. The rest is advertising.” – Pauline Kael**

**“It stinks!” – Jay Sherman**

**Reviewing movies, of course, is much more difficult than tossing off a cryptic comment like the one from cartoon character Jay Sherman above. And it’s more complicated than Roger Ebert’s “Thumbs Up or Thumbs Down” appraisal. Nevertheless, because of the powerful role movies play in popular culture, good critics are needed to provide honest, independent opinions about the quality of films being released today -- just as the late Pauline Kael pointed out in her famous quotation.**

**Maybe being a film critic isn’t the best job in the world, but it’s one of the most satisfying if you have a passion for movies and writing. This course is designed for students who want to learn various techniques for writing movie reviews as well as for interviewing actors, directors, screenwriters and other film-related personnel.**

**Perhaps you’d like to be the next Roger Ebert or Pauline Kael -- a respected critic with influence throughout the world. Or maybe you’re simply interested in writing better reviews for your own Website or Blog. In either case, this course is a good place to start.**

**In the event that you find you would prefer interaction with your instructor, feel free to contact Betty Jo Tucker at [reeltalk@comcast.net](mailto:reeltalk@comcast.net). She will have you pay the difference for the entire online course and will begin teaching you one-on-one.**



Photo by Bryan Kelsen for *The Pueblo Chieftain*

## Betty Jo Tucker

“All art forms converge in the cinema; that's why I enjoy writing and talking about movies so much,” says Betty Jo Tucker. Because of a passion for film, Betty Jo and her husband Larry see almost 200 movies a year. A retired college dean, Betty Jo serves as lead critic for ReelTalk Movie Reviews ([www.reeltalkreviews.com](http://www.reeltalkreviews.com)) and for News First Online (an NBC-affiliate Website). She also writes film commentary for the *COLORADO SENIOR BEACON*, and many of her reviews appear on The Romance Club site ([www.theromanceclub.com](http://www.theromanceclub.com)) and on the Real Movie News site in the United Kingdom. Her latest adventures involve hosting the Movie Addict Headquarters Show for BlogTalkRadio ([www.blogtalkradio.com/movieaddictheadquarters](http://www.blogtalkradio.com/movieaddictheadquarters)) and teaching an online course titled “The Reel Deal: Writing about Movies” for the Long Story Short School of Writing.

Phil Hall, book editor for the *NEW YORK RESIDENT*, calls Betty Jo one of today's finest film critics and “a graceful, intelligent judge of cinematic offerings.” According to Hall, “Tucker is wonderful as an observer and cogent as an interviewer.”

**During her ten years as an entertainment journalist, Betty Jo has interviewed such stars and filmmakers as Susan Sarandon, Ian McKellen, Brendan Fraser, Angelina Jolie, Guy Pearce, Aidan Quinn, Barry Bostwick, Phillip Noyce, Tony Shalhoub, Fred Willard, Chen Kaige, Aaron Eckhart, Willem Dafoe, M. Night Shyamalan, Oliver Parker, Douglas McGrath, Hector Elizondo, and Annette Bening.**

**While serving as Dean of Humanities at San Diego Mesa College, Betty Jo supervised expansion of film studies classes, designed an “Exploring Human Values through Film” course and coordinated a “Reel to Real Public Film Forum” program.**

**Betty Jo helped found the San Diego Film Critics Society and is a member of the Online Film Critics Society. Her amusing life-at-the-movies memoir, *CONFESSIONS OF A MOVIE ADDICT*, received rave reviews from fans and critics alike. Her latest book, *SUSAN SARANDON: A TRUE MAVERICK*, is a fascinating look at the extraordinary film career of an actress who’s become an American icon with influence throughout the world.**

**Betty Jo and Larry (a.k.a. Harry and Elizabeth Lawrence, co-authors of *IT HAD TO BE US*, a romantic memoir published by TRC which won First Place in the E-Book category of the 2006 Hollywood Book Festival) enjoy spending time with their son and daughter and seven grandchildren – who also love movies. The Tuckers live, where else, just five minutes away from Tinseltown, the only multiplex theater in Pueblo, Colorado.**

## COURSE OUTLINE



**OBJECTIVE:** This course is designed to increase understanding about film criticism while helping students learn techniques for writing movie reviews and interviewing film personnel.

### **FIRST SESSION: Developing a Reviewing Philosophy – Page 8**

This session explores the role of the critic and his/her responsibility to readers as well as objectivity vs. subjectivity, film knowledge and ethical concerns related to film criticism.

### **SECOND SESSION: Deciding What Matters about a Film – Page 12**

The second session examines such important topics as: art vs. business; universal themes; personal and social impact of films; plot and character arc; production values; directing; cinematography; background music; editing; and performances.

### **THIRD SESSION: Organizing and Writing the Review – Page 17**

This session covers the basic steps involved in writing a cohesive, insightful and entertaining review.

**FOURTH SESSION: Dealing with Negative Feedback – Page 20**

Most critics receive their fair share of “hate mail.” The fourth session provides tips for appropriate responses to such messages.

**FIFTH SESSION: Conducting Celebrity Interviews - Page 24**

The fifth session offers suggestions for questions to ask actors and other film personnel when interviewing them about their movies. It also includes information about how to obtain such interviews.

**SIXTH SESSION: Finding Outlets for Your Articles – Page 29**

The final session provides advice on how to get movie reviews/interviews published in print and on the Internet.



## FIRST SESSION



### TAKE ONE: Developing a Reviewing Philosophy

This first session is designed to explore the role of the critic and his/her responsibility as well as objectivity/subjectivity, film knowledge and ethical concerns related to film criticism.

#### ASSIGNMENT

After reading all the information below, write a description of the philosophy you hope to follow when writing your movie reviews and why you have decided on such a philosophy.

#### MY PHILOSOPHY

I think it's only fair to begin with a few brief comments about my own "reviewing" philosophy. In *Confessions of a Movie Addict*, my life-at-the-movies memoir, I admit to enjoying films primarily for their escapist entertainment value. However, I also look for impressive artistry, a great story, and memorable performances. Because I see approximately 200 movies a year, I try to include comparisons of cinematic elements and performances in most of my articles. If the movie reminds me of something in my own life, I think it's important to elaborate on that connection.

When writing a review, I like to offer more than an opinion of each movie, so I attempt to give the reader something to think about in terms of what matters in a film, but with a different twist whenever possible. When people disagree with me about a movie, I want them to have a better understanding of their own values, opinions, and beliefs after reading my review. But most of all, I hope they are enlightened and entertained.

## **OTHER APPROACHES**

In her book, *Everyone Wants My Job! The ABCs of Entertainment Writing* (Piccadilly Books, Ltd.), film critic Diana Saenger describes different types of movie reviewers. She points out that some, like David Elliott of the *San Diego Union-Tribune*, lean more toward artistic interpretations while others, like Roger Ebert, “relate a what-you-see-is-what-you-get review with a brief explanation of substance.”

According to Christopher Null, author of *Five Stars! How To Become a Film Critic, The World’s Greatest Job* (Sutro Press), there are critics who “merely strive to entertain us with jokes and broad humor in their writing, telling us little about the actual film,” and others who “deeply analyze a movie, draft thoughtful prose and place movies in a societal context, but without any entertainment value,” and a few who “do both.”

A few critics like Jeffrey Chen (of [ReelTalkReviews.com](http://www.reeltalkreviews.com)) and MaryAnn Johanson (The Flick Philosopher) write from unique perspectives. I’ll always be grateful to MaryAnn for encouraging me to “think and write outside the box,” which helped me become more creative and liven up my reviews. Jeffrey’s reviews are hard to describe, but they really make you think. Click on the link below to read what Jeffrey has to say about his reviewing philosophy:

<http://www.reeltalkreviews.com/browse/viewitem.asp?Type=feature&ID=201>

## **ROLE AND RESPONSIBILITY**

As a film critic, what is your role and responsibility? Above all, as Jeffrey Chen mentioned, you must continue to build your knowledge of film by seeing and reading about as many movies as you can. And, it’s important to impart your knowledge and love of cinema to your readers in your reviews. You have to be able to put your feelings about various elements of the film into words your readers can understand. You must also have the courage to say what you think.

**Your main responsibility is to help your readers decide which movies are worth their hard-earned money and why. As Christopher Null points out, “When we find a critic we often agree with, we find someone who can help us connect with entertainment we would otherwise miss. We also avoid costly mistakes by skipping movies that look good on paper but which stink in reality.”**

**And Diana Saenger reminds us, “No matter how many nice press packets the studios send you, you have an allegiance to only one constituency, the target audience of your review. Your readers are counting on your honesty and objectivity.”**

### **OBJECTIVITY/SUBJECTIVITY**

**However, being objective does not mean ignoring your own attitudes and experience. If you have a particular bias, be sure to mention that in the review. For example, for some reason or other, I don’t enjoy Penelope Cruz or Matthew McConaughey in most of their performances, so when I review their movies, I should confess my subjectivity where they are concerned. Regarding Ms. Cruz, I’m certainly not proud of my out-of-the-box review of *Vanilla Sky*, which you can check out by clicking on this link:**

**<http://www.reeltalkreviews.com/browse/viewitem.asp?type=review&id=24>.**

**I think the devil made me do that one!**

### **ADDITIONAL ETHICAL CONCERNS**

**It’s important to keep in mind the following list of things NOT to do in your reviews:**

- 1. Call down reviews of other critics.**
- 2. Make fun of an actor’s physical characteristics. (Angelina Jolie’s lips come to mind.)**

**Reveal so much about the plot that it spoils the movie for people who haven't seen it. (I still remember the furor caused by one critic who wrote that Darth Vader was Luke Skywalker's father!)**

**3. Use more than 25 words in succession from another source without crediting that source.**

**I sincerely hope the above information is helpful to you in developing your own reviewing philosophy.**



The Reel Deal – Long Story Short School of Writing  
**SECOND SESSION**



**TAKE TWO: Deciding What Matters about a Film**

This session examines such key film considerations as: art vs. business; universal themes; personal and social impact of films; plot and character arc; production values; directing; cinematography; art direction; editing; background music; and actors' performances.

**ASSIGNMENT**

After reading all the information below, please select a movie you've seen recently and decide which five of the elements above matter most about it write an explanation of why you feel this way.

**ART VS. BUSINESS**

Irving Berlin assured us "There's no business like show business," and films are no exception. In order to stay in business, movie studios/production companies must make a profit. Weekend box office figures are reported as big news every Monday, and a great deal of attention is given to the movies earning the most money. And yet, film is primarily an art form – it's probably the most important one of our time. Movies bring music, writing, acting, music and photography together in a feast for the eyes, the intellect and the

emotions. Nothing pleases me more than when a film of outstanding artistic beauty, such as Zhang Yimou's *Hero*, also manages to be a commercial success. And nothing irritates me more than having to watch a movie obviously made with the dollar sign as its ONLY goal. I'm sure you can name a few of those flicks!

## **UNIVERSAL THEMES**

I think it's important to look for universal themes -- or the lack thereof -- in a movie. Steve Martin's character in *Grand Canyon* declares, "All life's riddles are answered in the movies." Hyperbole, yes. But many important questions have been answered for me by the movies. What happens when a person is consumed by obsession? Watching Jimmy Stewart stalk Kim Novak in *Vertigo* showed the dangers involved. Is there a universal longing for home? Judy Garland's search for the way back to Kansas in *The Wizard of Oz* proves that to be true. Can someone be too ambitious? *Citizen Kane* dispels all doubts. What's it like to be different and made fun of because you are? Films like *Simon Birch*, *Edward Scissorhands*, and *The Elephant Man* gave me an inkling of those feelings. How can a teacher motivate students? *Stand and Deliver* and *Dangerous Minds* offer valuable tips. What is the tragedy of substance addiction? *Days of Wine and Roses* reveals more than any textbook, and so on. There are many other universal themes dealt with in movies, and I don't believe this aspect of a film should be neglected in a review.

## **PERSONAL AND SOCIAL IMPACT**

If a movie makes a personal impact on the critic or on society as a whole, that fact should be highlighted by the reviewer. For example, *Lorenzo's Oil* shows the power of movies to change people's lives for the better. It's based on the true story of parents who refused to give up when doctors told them there was no hope for their ailing son. Click on the link below for my review of this powerful film:

<http://www.reeltalkreviews.com/browse/viewitem.asp?type=review&id=877>

As I mentioned in my book about Susan Sarandon, *Lorenzo's Oil* joins *A Slender Thread* and *Pay It Forward* on my list of favorite films with personal and social impact. All three movies have inspired people to get involved in activities to help others. After seeing Sidney Poitier's compelling portrayal of a college student volunteering at a crisis center in *A Slender Thread*, many viewers throughout the nation became involved in suicide prevention centers. *Pay It Forward*, although spoiled for me because of its unsatisfactory ending, created quite an impact with its theme of doing good deeds for three individuals and expecting them to do the same for three others who each help three others and so forth. Films like these serve as a welcome antidote to the relentless car chases, violent action sequences and mind-numbing special effects emphasized in so many current movies.

### **PLOT AND CHARACTER ARC**

Some colleges offer a course titled "Film as Literature" (or something similar) which focuses on the story of the movie – its plot and character arc as presented in the screenplay. A reviewer should consider the following questions when analyzing this aspect of a film. Does the story hold together and seem cohesive and meaningful? Is it interesting? How well does the plot handle conflict and resolution? Do the characters go through emotional growth or change?

### **PRODUCTION VALUES**

Many films don't look glossy or expensive, but that doesn't mean they're not worth seeing. For example, one of the most enjoyable movies I saw last year was *Napoleon Dynamite*, a little film that looked almost like a home movie. A glossy sheen would have spoiled all the fun in that one. The amateurish appearance of the film worked to its advantage, mostly because of its matching subject matter -- the adventures of a goodhearted high school nerd. On the other hand, a home-movie look would sink epic films like *Gladiator* or *The Chronicles of Narnia*.

## **DIRECTING**

Christopher Null, in his *Five Stars!* book, says, “Directing is difficult to judge, especially for a novice, because directors have a lot of help from supporting crew. Good acting is one sign of good directing, but when actors work well together, it’s a clearer indication of a good director at the helm. Good directing also comprises the technical side of filmmaking: good shot selection, inventive photography, unobtrusive camera movements. Pacing is also a critical part of direction. . . Does the movie develop a quickening sense of pace leading up to movie’s high point or is the pace jerky?”

## **CINEMATOGRAPHY**

In *Everyone Wants My Job*, Diana Saenger lists important questions to consider when evaluating a film’s photography. Do the film’s camera angles portray the images the filmmaker was looking for by capturing the natural elements? Is the depth of the camera shots noticeable? Are the lighting, color schemes and contrasts of shadow appropriate to each scene?

For me, one of the most beautiful cinematography achievements of the past ten years can be seen in *Girl with a Pearl Earring*. Click on the link below to read my review:

<http://www.reeltalkreviews.com/browse/viewitem.asp?type=review&id=683>

## **ART DIRECTION**

Sets, costumes and special effects can make or break a movie. Does everything look authentic? In many films, the art direction assumes major importance by contributing to the high quality of a production. Two recent films that impressed me in this regard are *Cinderella Man* and *The Greatest Game Ever Played*.

## **EDITING**

When analyzing editing, a reviewer should consider if the scenes begin only when necessary and end before they become boring as well as whether or not the sequence of scenes makes sense and the film moves along smoothly.



## **BACKGROUND MUSIC**

Critical in setting the mood and emotional tone of a film, background music played a key movie role even before “talkies.” During the showing of silent movies in days of yore, pianists were hired to play suitable music for each film. Relevant considerations about background music involve whether or not it gels with the movie and how well it evokes the necessary emotions. Also worthy of note is the negative effect of music that overwhelms and intrudes on the rest of the film.

## **PERFORMANCES**

I’ve saved the best for last. I have to confess that it’s the actors who capture my attention more than anything else in a movie. I agree with the late great Bette Davis who declared, “The real actor has a direct line to the collective heart.” While actors get paid for doing what most of us would love to do -- pretend to be someone else -- the best ones do their job so well it helps the rest of us understand who we really are. And they make acting look very easy -- or, as Henry Fonda explained, they “don’t let the wheels show.” Acting coach Tony Ron summed it up best when he called acting “the one art you can’t be caught doing.” Film critic Christopher Null advises reviewers to ask themselves if the acting in a film is natural or stilted and if someone in the cast stands out above the rest as well as whether or not anyone was miscast or playing the same version of roles he/she has done many times before.

Whew! That’s a lot of information, but I hope it’s useful to you and helps with this assignment to analyze a movie in five of its most important elements as described above.

The Reel Deal – Long Story Short School of Writing  
**THIRD SESSION**



**TAKE THREE: Organizing and Writing the Review**

This session covers the basic steps in writing a cohesive, insightful and entertaining review.

**ASSIGNMENT**

After reading all the information below, write a review (400 words minimum) of any movie you choose -- except for the one you covered in your last assignment. If you didn't include editing and/or cinematography in your last assignment, please try to include them in this review.

**MY REVIEWING PROCESS**

I thought it might be helpful to describe the reviewing process I follow. I begin by going over any notes taken while watching the film (which isn't easy, considering my handwriting makes chicken-scratches look good). I think about which areas I want to emphasize, decide on a "hook" for the opening, and then start writing. The first and last paragraphs are hardest for me, probably because I want them to match up in some kind of coherent manner and I'm not always successful at doing this.

In the main body of the piece, I try to cover the film's essence while focusing on what I think matters the most about the movie. Giving away too much about the plot is a no-no and makes for a boring review, so I try to avoid this as much as possible. I also like to add a bit of humor, if appropriate, and some behind-the-scenes information about the film that most readers may not be aware of. In addition, I mention any of my personal biases where needed.

After I finish my first draft, my husband checks it for “elbows” -- things that stick out and interfere with the flow. (Every film critic needs someone who will be candid about what needs fixing in each review.) Whenever my husband isn’t available, I read the review out loud to myself. This helps discover any awkward phrasing.

Finally, the most important step of all -- the dreaded re-write. I check again for errors in grammar, overuse of passive verbs, lack of specifics, and unclear references. To me, a review is never finished. It can always be improved. If I didn’t have a deadline, I’d probably still be working on the first review I ever wrote.

Click on the links below to read three of my reviews (*Red Eye*, *Walk the Line* and *The Weatherman*) which illustrate how this process works for me.

<http://www.reeltalkreviews.com/browse/viewitem.asp?type=review&id=1479>

<http://www.reeltalkreviews.com/browse/viewitem.asp?type=review&id=1368>

<http://www.reeltalkreviews.com/browse/viewitem.asp?type=review&id=1458>

## **BASIC QUESTIONS**

In his *Five Stars!* book, film critic Christopher Null lists the following questions a critic should consider before writing a review:

- Did the movie achieve its goal -- did you laugh, cry, or scream in terror like you were supposed to?
- Is the story interesting -- why or why not?
- Is the acting believable?
- How is the direction?
- What about the support crew (cinematography, sound, costumes, music, special effects)?
- Was there a worthwhile point to the movie?
- Is the film too long or too short?
- How well does everything come together?

According to Null, the questions above aren't a checklist. "A film is a collection of elements both good and bad, but ultimately it is a single entity that should be considered as a whole instead of just a bunch of parts," he states.

### **MORE GOOD ADVICE**

James Plath, who teaches editorial writing (including movie reviews) at Illinois Wesleyan University, gives good advice to the wannabe film critics in his class. He reminds them, for example, that "audiences deserve to know what a film is about, but they also deserve to experience the same delights of discovery as the critic." He tells students to avoid not just end-of-film plot spoilers, but anything en route that might take away from the viewers' enjoyment. "I also try to get them to key in on a baseline emotion or reaction that they may have had to a film," he explains, "and summarize their assessment in a headline or 'nut graph' -- that is, a paragraph that reveals, in a nutshell, their bottom-line assessment. From there it's all development. If it was boring or flat, what made it so? If there was a constant state of tension, what elements of cinematography or direction contributed to that? In other words, I get them to start with an impression and to go on to articulate all those things that contributed to that impression."

### **IT'S YOUR REVIEW**

Remember, you can't cover everything about a film -- unless you're writing a book about it. This is **YOUR** review. It represents your take on the film --- what **YOU** saw in it and how you felt about it.

Good luck with your review!

## SESSION FOUR



### TAKE FOUR: Dealing with Negative Feedback

Most critics receive their fair share of “hate mail.” This session provides advice concerning appropriate responses to such messages.

#### ASSIGNMENT

After reading all the information below, write an initial response (what you would really LIKE to say) plus a well-thought out answer to the hypothetical message listed at the end of TAKE FOUR. Also, please explain what you want to accomplish with your final response. This assignment requires more thinking than writing, but it should be fun to do.

#### PERSONAL EXAMPLES

Hearing reactions about my reviews from movie fans usually makes me very happy -- even if they disagree with my opinion about a particular film. But some “hate mail” is a challenge to deal with. For example, one person was quite upset about my positive review of *The Day after Tomorrow*” “You are a lousy film critic -- but a great comedian,” he wrote. Here’s my response:

*Dear Jude,*

*Thanks for reading my review of THE DAY AFTER TOMORROW and for sharing your reactions with me. As Jean Hagen said in SINGIN' IN THE RAIN, "If we bring a little joy into yer humdrum lives, it makes us feel as though all our hard work ain't been in vain fer nothin'."*

*Cheers!*

*Betty Jo*

*P.S. Seriously, Jude, your message included the wittiest (and probably most perceptive) call down I've received in a long time. .*

That particular review also hit a nerve with another man who called me “the stupidest person on the face of the earth” for being concerned about global warming.

My parody of *The Ring* provoked almost as many negative vibes. One fan of the movie stated, “You’re just trying to be clever and prove you’re smarter than the rest of us.” After re-reading what I wrote, I had to apologize for not including a disclaimer and explaining that the piece was meant as a parody.

My latest hate mail message came from someone very upset over my negative review of *War of the Worlds*. Below is my correspondence with that avid movie fan.

**TO BETTY JO FROM JAMES:** *You cannot be serious about your review of WAR OF THE WORLDS. I have never, ever seen a critic's review so far off the mark that I cringe as I read it. There is no substance whatsoever in your review. Admit it. You just don't like it – but you certainly cannot put your reasons into anything tangible. Yes – you are nit-picky! I cringe at the thought that your might actually get paid to be a movie critic. If you do, then I still have a chance to be a paid brain surgeon!*

**MY RESPONSE:** *Thanks for the feedback, James. I'll try to do better.*

**REPLY FROM JAMES:** *I'm sorry I was so mean – I had a bad day. But I loved WAR OF THE WORLDS. I saw it 4 times already.*

**MY RESPONSE:** *No apology necessary, James. I get just as upset when I read negative reviews about movies I love. You must be a movie addict like me!*

A critic should never forget how much fans love their movies.

### **DEFUSE THE SITUATION**

In *Five Stars!*, film critic Christopher Null claims he turns many hate mail letter-writers into faithful readers of his film site by defusing the situation. Here's a stock response he uses when he pans a movie that other critics have rated well: "I know the world has embraced this movie, but frankly, I just didn't see it the same way. I'd like to think that readers would rather read an honest opinion than another write-up that simply falls in line with the conventional wisdom. Sorry we don't see eye to eye on this, and I hope you'll give us another shot in the future."

According to Null, no matter how smart you are as a critic, you should expect to get hate mail. "In fact, you should relish it," he says. "The more hate mail you get, the more people you know are reading your reviews and the more seriously they're taking your opinions."

However, Null suggests ignoring mail laced with profanities. "If you respond, that's great for them (the senders), because they can call you even more names the second time around."

### **HYPOTHETICAL MESSAGE**

Sally Filmfan has sent the following message to you:

*Dear Reel Deal Student,*

*Your glowing review of THE INSIDE MAN disturbs me even more than this ridiculous film did. I went to see it the other day because you recommended it, but what a let-down! You said the plot was “exquisitely complex” when, in reality, it’s a jumbled mess. And all those darn flash-forwards did nothing but make things more confusing.*

*Sorry, but THE INSIDE MAN is not my idea of art or entertainment, and it really bugs me to pay my hard earned money to watch something as dreadful as this. Can you help me get my \$10.50 back?*

*Angrily,*

*Sally Filmfan*

**Have fun with this assignment!**





## FIFTH SESSION



### TAKE FIVE: Conducting Celebrity Interviews

This fifth session offers suggestions and advice concerning interviews with actors or other film personnel. It also includes information about obtaining such interviews.

#### ASSIGNMENT

After reading all the information below, decide on two people -- one an actor, the other a director or screenwriter -- you would like to interview in connection with one of their films (choose a different movie for each interview). It doesn't hurt to aim high for this assignment! Write up a list of questions for the people you select and explain your rationale for each question. Also tell why you chose your interviewees.

#### SEEING STARS

One of the most exciting things about being a film critic involves the opportunity to interview people connected with various movies. I feel fortunate to have talked personally with such interesting celebrities as Annette Bening, Ian McKellen, Angelina Jolie, Tony Shalhoub, Susan Sarandon, M. Night Shyamalan, Anjelica Huston, Fred Willard, Guy Pearce,

**John Sayles, Daryl Hannah, Kris Kristofferson, Aidan Quinn, Hector Elizondo, Peter O'Toole, Tilda Swinton, Willem Dafoe, Billy Crudup and Brendan Fraser. Although some of my interactions with celebrities turned out to be very funny, the joke was always on me.**

**Here's an example. While I'm reluctant to reveal my most embarrassing interview, at least it provided a great story for director Jan Sverak to tell his friends in the Czech Republic. Sverak and his father Zdenek came to San Diego in February of 1997 to arouse interest in their wonderful film *Kolya*, winner of the Oscar for Best Foreign Language Film that year. The handsome Zdenek, who plays a middle-aged Czech cellist saddled with a six-year old Russian refugee named Kolya, resembles Sean Connery both physically and in terms of his screen charisma. Naturally, I was eager to meet him in person.**

**But the elder Sverak suffered jet lag and opted for a nap in his Hyatt Hotel room instead of doing interviews. Claiming his father doesn't travel well, the younger Sverak said, "Maybe you can take a peek at him before you leave." At the close of the interview, I reminded him of his offer by saying, "I'd like to peek at your father now. I'll be very quiet." Sverak just looked at me, stunned. "I was kidding, of course," he declared as he ushered me quickly to the door.**

**Hopefully, the suggestions included in this session will help you avoid a catastrophe like that.**

## **BE PREPARED**

**In *Everyone Wants My Job*, Diana Saenger writes, "Do your homework before the interview by preparing a list of questions and conducting your research. Check the press kits for other films and professional credits of the talent. Asking the right questions at the right time is your key to a successful interview, and this can only be accomplished if you have done your research."**

**I agree with Diana about the importance of research, so I'd like to add "Be sure to Google the person you're scheduled to interview." Thank heavens for the Internet! It's very helpful in learning as much as possible about your interviewee and the movie in question prior to the interview.**

## **SAMPLE QUESTIONS**

Diana lists the following sample questions for interviews with actors:

1. **What drew you to this movie?**
2. **What was the motivation you used to flesh out your character?**
3. **Did you draw on any real-life experience to enhance your performance?**
4. **What do you hope the audience takes home after they see this film?**

Here's a link to Diana's interview with actress Joan Allen:

<http://www.reeltalkreviews.com/browse/viewitem.asp?type=feature&id=186>

I think making questions as specific as possible as well as asking the person about his/her acting philosophy, why he/she became an actor, and what new projects are underway also makes the interview more interesting. Remaining flexible is also important. Here's the link to an interview in which I "went with the flow" and took advantage of a unique opportunity that presented itself.

<http://www.reeltalkreviews.com/browse/viewitem.asp?type=feature&id=263>

Some actors will agree to e-mail interviews. Here's a link to the article I wrote recently from Alan Cumming's responses to my e-mail questions:

<http://www.reeltalkreviews.com/browse/viewitem.asp?type=feature&id=232>

When interviewing directors, I like to ask such questions as:

- **What techniques did you use to help the actors deliver their best performances?**
- **Why did you decide to become a director?**
- **Why did you choose this particular project?**
- **What were your best and worst experiences while working on this film?**
- **If you had a bigger budget and/or more time, what would you have done differently?**

□ **What’s the most important thing you would like people to know about you and/or your movie(s) and why?**

**Here’s a link to my interview with director Phillip Noyce – it’s one of my favorites:**

**<http://www.reeltalkreviews.com/browse/viewitem.asp?type=feature&id=33>**

**Questions for screenwriters, art directors, cinematographers, etc. should be adapted to include what’s significant about the movie in terms of their particular craft.**

**“Be careful not to be too laid back and self-effacing,” Diana warns. “Learn to be demanding in an inoffensive way. Don’t ask yes or no questions, but ones that require specific answers. . .The difference between good interviewers and reporters who write news stories is the ability to get your subject to talk. Beginners often think tough questions will lose them the interview, but celebrities recognize someone good at his job and tend to bond quicker with those journalists than the ones who sit back and take notes.”**

### **INTERVIEW DON'TS**

**In addition to the “things not to do” mentioned above, Diana says the following behavior is unacceptable in an interview situation:**

- **Gum chewing**
- **Smoking**
- **Touching the talent**
- **Bringing someone with you to the interview**
- **Being disrespectful to other journalists at a round-table interview.**

**Christopher Null (in *Five Stars!*) adds other “don’ts” to the list as follows:**

- 1. Don’t ask stupid questions like, “If you could be a tree, which one would you be?”**
- 2. Don’t pry too far into private lives. (He also should’ve mentioned “Don’t ask to see them when they’re sleeping!”)**
- 3. Don’t ask too many questions about the current film. (“Interviews are much more interesting when they take into account the entire body of work of the artist,” he declares.)**

## **OBTAINING INTERVIEWS**

**Interviews with celebrities are usually arranged by the publicist handling their current film. These interviews -- 20 to 30 minutes -- may be in person or by telephone. If your reviews appear in an outlet receiving invitations to press screenings, the publicist will contact you by e-mail or phone when interviews are available. If you are reviewing movies for a major outlet, you might even be invited to a press junket and scheduled for a roundtable discussion where several journalists at one time question the talent.**

**For film critics operating a new site, finding out contact information about the person they wish to interview might actually lead to obtaining one — at least a phone interview. That’s where Google comes in handy again. If the name of the agent or publicist can be found, a courteous telephone call or a well-written fax or e-mail might do the trick. Also, “Celebrity Access,” a directory by Thomas Burford, contains 7,000 addresses of film stars and celebrities. It may be a bit outdated, but some of the information is still accurate. In addition, many fan sites contain information about how to get in touch with the star’s agent or publicist.**

**Remember, don’t get discouraged. A good interview is worth pursuing. Good luck with this assignment!**



## SIXTH SESSION



### TAKE SIX: Finding Outlets for Your Articles

This final session provides advice on how to get movie reviews/interviews published in print and on the Internet.

#### ASSIGNMENT

After reading the information below, draft a query letter to a print publication or an e-mail to an Internet site concerning your interest in writing movie reviews and/or other film-related articles for that particular outlet -- along with any comments you would like to share with me about this course.

#### MY WAY

With apologies to *Old Blue Eyes*, what follows are some of my personal experiences in my search to be a published film critic. After retiring from my job as a dean at San Diego Mesa College, I decided to spend most of the time indulging in my passion for the movies. Becoming a movie critic seemed the socially acceptable way to do this, so I sent several reviews to local newspapers, hoping for the best. Within a few months, my articles appeared regularly in the *La Mesa News* and all six *East County Forum* publications. When I moved to Colorado, I noticed the *Colorado Senior Beacon* didn't feature any movie reviews, so I contacted the editor and volunteered my services. I also met with the news director of a local television station and

offered to review films on the TV Website. In each case, I indicated my willingness to submit reviews and articles free of charge until proving my worth.

## **THE RIGHT EDITOR**

How do you find the right person to send your “pitch” to?

Christopher Null, in his *Five Stars!* book, says, “At newspapers and alternate weeklies, your first step should be the ‘masthead,’ the section which indicates who edits what part of the paper. The editor you want will be the ‘entertainment editor’ or the ‘arts editor,’ depending on what your paper calls its movie section. The smaller the paper, the easier this will be to find.”

Regarding Internet sites, Null writes, “Finally, there’s the web, which is essentially a free for all. Many websites note their primary editorial contacts if you click the ‘About Us’ or ‘Contact’ links.”

Diana Saenger, in *Everyone Wants My Job*, suggests checking out *Writer’s Market*, published by *Writer’s Digest*, because this book “contains more than four thousand places to sell articles, stories, plays, fillers, etc.”

## **ABOUT THE QUERY LETTER**

After finding the right editor to contact, your query letter should be customized according to the outlet selected. Tell a bit about your qualifications, but avoid clichés (Null’s example: “Have I got a story for you!”) and don’t send any clips or writing samples unless the outlet’s guidelines specifically request them. The editor will let you know when to send writing samples. For an e-mail, don’t send attachments. Like most editors, I won’t open them because of the virus danger. However, if you have your own website, go ahead and include a link to a review in your letter. Adding something complimentary about the outlet you’re writing to is appropriate, but only if it’s sincere.

## YOUR OWN SITE

Creating your own site is the fastest way to begin your film criticism career. Choose a catchy name (don't use your own), one that's easy to type and remember. If funds to hire a webmaster are a problem, go with freebies like [www.blogger.com](http://www.blogger.com) or [www.geocities.com](http://www.geocities.com). Having your own site will enable you to post reviews whenever you like, and you will have links to share with prospective editors.

## RECOMMENDATION

I've quoted extensively from two books during our sessions, and it's my strong recommendation that you consider obtaining copies of both books for more detailed information about the topics we've covered — and more. Christopher Null's *Five Stars! How To Become a Film Critic, the World's Greatest Job* is available from Sutro Press. Here's a link to my review of that very helpful book:

<http://www.reeltalkreviews.com/browse/viewitem.asp?type=feature&id=191>

Diana Saenger's user-friendly *Everyone Wants My Job: The ABC's of Entertainment Writing* can be ordered at [www.sandspublishing.com](http://www.sandspublishing.com).





## **OFFER OF CONTINUED ASSISTANCE**

After you have completed the course, if you would like me to critique future movie reviews, don't hesitate to contact me any time at [reeltalk@comcast.net](mailto:reeltalk@comcast.net). Also, I'm always available to assist you regarding other aspects related to "writing about movies" as needed.

## **COURSE COMMENTS**

If you feel comfortable doing so, please share with me your comments/reactions to the course and how you plan to use what you've learned from it.

I greatly appreciate your interest in "The Reel Deal: Writing about Movies" course. And I extend you my warmest wishes for success in your writing career.

**Betty Jo Tucker, Instructor**  
**The Reel Deal: Writing About Movies**  
[www.LssWritingSchool.com/TheReelDeal.html](http://www.LssWritingSchool.com/TheReelDeal.html)