

# WRITING IN THE DARK: COMPOSING CRITICISM

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If you asked Walter Kerr, drama critic for *the New York Times*, David Denby, film critic for *New York Magazine*, and Neal Gabler, formerly film critic for *Monthly Detroit*, what steps each of them follows in composing a review, you'd be given a familiar description of a linear process. Each attends a theatrical performance or cinematic screening, takes notes on what he sees, transcribes and organizes the notes, creates an outline of some kind, and begins drafting a review which he will later revise before submitting to an editor. Thus described, the process of critical writing seems direct and logical, and advice to young scholars being assigned to write criticism in secondary or college classrooms might logically include a description of those steps. However, so bald a description leaves out some essential elements in composing criticism that a closer examination of the earliest moments of that process reveals; such elements ought to be considered in the design of critical writing assignments.

In the course of a more general study of professional expository writers, people who write short non-fiction articles on a deadline, for a predictable audience, including business and technical writers, essayists, political columnists, and critics, I read widely in the work of Walter Kerr, David Denby, and Neal Gabler, interviewed them about their writing habits, and examined notes, rough drafts, and revised final copy of some of the articles we discussed. A considerable amount of the evidence from that study confirms the applicability of Linda Flower and John Hayes' cognitive process model of composing to the writing of criticism.

For example, as suggested a moment ago, the critics give evidence of going through such subprocesses as planning, translating, and reviewing. Each talked about taking notes and examining, transcribing, or arranging them to create a tentative outline

or sense of structure. Neal Gabler claims to write on cards and pads and to outline the piece carefully before he writes; from that outline he writes a review of about 1600 words in three sessions, a few hours at a sitting, writing, rereading, adding, revising as he rereads and writes.

David Denby's heuristics are even more systematic: from notes taken in the dark while viewing the movie, perhaps on a Tuesday, he sits down on a Friday with a notepad, examines his notes, and makes fresh notes under specific headings, until it is "broken down for purposes of analysis into separate topics in front of me," and then makes an outline. He drafts the 1200 word review on Saturday, rewrites on Sunday, and takes it to his editor on Monday.

Moreover, the rhetorical situation affects their processes, just as Flower and Hayes claim. Gabler, at the time I talked to him, was writing ten columns a year for a monthly magazine; Denby wrote 48 columns a year for a weekly magazine; Kerr wrote a weekly Sunday review for his newspaper. Their writing was scheduled to the deadlines of the publications with some awareness of the audience for that publication. More important, all three gave evidence that the "text produced so far" influenced the text to follow; all three worked a great deal on the lead of the article. As Kerr says, "There're many times when I have to tear up the first page or first paragraph or three-quarters of a page ten to twelve times before I'm satisfied it's going." Sometimes the whole of his first day—he starts Fridays at 1 p.m. and hopes to finish on Saturday or Sunday so he can phone it in and proofread the transcription over the phone on Monday—is given over to producing a "lead, a first sentence."

Similarly, Denby uses the outline less as a strict structure to fill in than as "a safety net" as he calls it, a way of knowing what the major points will be and staying on track with them. Otherwise he depends on his lead to direct the article: "I'll try to write my lead to see where that's going to go and see the way the piece is going to develop." Gabler tries to organize so well in the initial processes that the piece follows systematically from his lead with little opportunity to deviate as he writes; the text extends itself like a legal brief.

Finally, all of these critics give evidence of the role that long term memory plays in the cognitive process of writing by the automaticity of their decisions about format and audience, which are negligible in any overt sense, and the obvious storage of data related to their subjects of film and theater from which they routinely

draw. In this area as in others, the critics' experience supports the reliability of the cognitive process model as a paradigm of composing, as do the experiences of the writers of different kinds of compositions in the study.

However, something in the composing of critics separates them from essayists and opinion columnists and business writers, something about the intersection of long term memory and the writing process just at the juncture where the commitment to composition begins. To draw a metaphor from computers, there is a moment in the composition of a review where the critic selects the configuration of his criticism, initializes, as it were, the composition by generating the patterns by which it can store and process information. I don't believe that moment is exclusive to criticism, but criticism can focus our attention on it because the point at which an author's predilections and the context of his composing meet is more transparent than in more personal forms of writing.

In a sense what I'm suggesting here is that an important key to what happens in composition occurs not in what the writer does after the discovery of a topic but in the ways the writer decides he has any topic at all. The critics all talk in terms of the ways they are moved to write about a film or play. Gabler says his first decision in choosing what to write about is to look for "a film that interests me so deeply that I feel the compulsion to write about it." Denby says:

Whether I have an edge on the movie, have something I really want to say about it, the intensity of my feeling about a given movie is very important in determining how much I'm going to write about it.

The clues to sources of such compulsion lie in the notes taken in the theatre or in response to the experience.

Part of it lies in a state of constant receptivity; Gabler says,

I'm always scribbling things down on cards and pads, whenever anything occurs to me that I think I might someday write about, even if I think it's not going to happen until a year from now.

The notes are an on-going idea-gathering, the "assiduous string-saving" other writers like Tom Wicker refer to when they discuss folders of ideas, clippings, and memos (Root). But in the context of the critical act the notes are considerably more.

Denby explains that, when he sits down to write the first draft, he will:

try to replay the movie in my head using my notes as a memory aid, literally think it through, think what happens. In other words I might write down in my notes some reaction to a scene or something or just even a few elements or the visual components or even plot elements in a scene and then I will try to reconstruct at home when I'm sitting there what it was that made me feel at that moment whatever it was I felt. When you're sitting there in the movie, there are really two media: the medium of movie that's playing on the screen and then there's yourself which is kind of a receiving medium and you want to recreate what it was on the screen that produced those feelings in you that you had at that moment.

Similarly, Walter Kerr's transcription of his notes written in the dark in the theater is not just a way of organizing or making legible; as he says,

What happens for me is that by going through all the notes I put myself back in the mood of the play, as I felt when I was watching it. It becomes more real. I may have seen two other plays since that one, which tends to blur things, or neutralize them, but if you sit down and spend 45 minutes writing down everything that struck you in the theater, then by the time you're through with that you're sort of close to the experience again.

For both critics the notes are not merely memory devices but ways of reliving the experience palpably enough to generate responses to it in an environment where composition is possible; they are no longer writing in the dark.

But a more fundamental consideration would be the question of how the critics decide what notes to take in the first place. In other words, what causes the responses they take notes on and attempt to relive for reviewing? The evidence from these three critics suggests that the answers lie as much in the context of the viewing and the connections the critic makes between the background he brings to the performance and the film or play he's viewing as they do in the content or competence of the work being reviewed.

For example, before Neal Gabler wrote the piece entitled "Beach Blanket Cinema" he had seen three films—*Porkie's in March*,

*Diner* in early summer, and *Fast Times at Ridgemont High* in August. As he watched *Fast Times*, it occurred to him not only that the specific film was different from other films about adolescence but that there had been “a fair number of films that dealt with adolescence in ways that were different than films in the past.” Part of what started him thinking about the issue was his negative reaction to the film. As a single film *Fast Times* wouldn’t have been worth reviewing for Gabler, but as he says:

when you put it in the context of a film like *Porkie’s* and its success, these films reverberating off of one another sort of struck something in me and then when I thought of *Diner* . . . and what that says about adolescence, I saw a piece beginning to form in my mind.

After identifying the traditions of teenage movies and comparing past films with the current crop, Gabler decided that the difference between the traditional films and contemporary movies was “the difference between adolescence as a bridge between childhood and maturity and adolescence being no bridge whatsoever.” But the impetus for the article comes from the ability to connect one film to trends and traditions in cinema—to relate a current experience to a larger context.

David Denby also wrote a review of *Fast Times at Ridgemont High*, but it was far more positive than Gabler’s, taking the view that the film is seen “from a sympathetic but skeptical feminine eye,” a reference to the director, Amy Heckerling. In the beginning of the review, says Denby,

I talk about this girl losing her virginity and she was 15 and she was lying on a bench in the San Fernando Valley in a baseball dugout and she read what was on the ceiling and how the director, who was a woman, put the camera up on the ceiling which is something a male director probably wouldn’t have thought of doing since men generally, when they’re losing their virginity, are not on the bottom.

The scene had a strong impact on Denby; his original lead for the review was “Surfer Nazis. That’s what it says on the roof of the dugout in which Stacy Hamilton was losing her virginity at the age of 15!” Because the sentence structure seemed convoluted, he changed the opening to: “In *Fast Times at Ridgemont High* Stacy

Hamilton is busy losing her virginity and she looks up and this is what she sees.” His perception of that scene, his strong response to it, and his sympathy for the mall environment depicted in the film influence him to react differently to the film than Gabler does. In fact, where Gabler links *Fast Times* with *Porkie’s* to condemn a trend in teenage films, Denby states that *Fast Times* may be advertised as “another raucously blue beer party celebration of raunchy teens like the repulsive big success *Porkie’s* but it’s actually very sweet, a fresh funny exploration of adolescent anxieties and confusion.” The difference in interpretation lies in the contexts for which the critics are making connections—Gabler to traditions in film and comparative adolescent releases, Denby to a feminist perspective and a trip to California, including its malls, a few weeks before he saw the film.

Even an idea which seems spontaneously generated is likely to be the result of a long accumulation of context. Walter Kerr observes that in one review the lead hit him “right smack out of nowhere.” He says,

In yesterday’s article, the first line was, “The next time I see Colleen Dewhurst, I want to see her with her hair combed,” sounding like her mother, and that just hit me out of nowhere. Because I was going through the play and I was seeing Colleen Dewhurst do this, do that, and it just struck me—I kind of liked it as an out of place attitude. I guess.

But in the course of conversation Kerr recalled a host of anecdotes about Colleen Dewhurst’s “earth mother” image on stage; the context for his spontaneous remark had been building over a period of years and a number of roles on the stage. It was the kind of remark that someone unfamiliar with Dewhurst or indifferent to her appearance could not make. Indeed, it may be argued that none of these critics could duplicate the criticism of either of the others, because the context in which connections are made for reviewing are individual, even idiosyncratic, to the critic.

From what I’ve been saying it’s obvious that I believe the key to criticism is connections made in context. What may be less clear, but seems increasingly apparent to me, is that criticism of film or theater—perhaps of any kind—is first of all a reading act and then a writing act. Like any reader the critic interacts with an artistic artifact in the same transactional way he would interact with any text.

Thus the writing that the critic does in the dark is less a dispassionate and objective evaluation based on more or less universal criteria and more the same kind of subjective response and individualized schemes that the lay viewer or reader brings, in a less sophisticated way, to similar works. The testimony of three well-established critics seems to support this view.

Such reflections are, I think, valuable for their own sake, interesting to those who would devote their time to understanding what happens in various generic composing processes, food for thought for the theoretically inclined. But it seems to me that there are some implications here for the way we bring our students to critical writing and the demands we make upon them. Consider the following:

If reading is an act in which the reader interacts with a text to combine the implications of the work with his or her own context, then our appreciation of the reader's experience with a text has to extend to the critical act, to the reading of non-print "texts" which operate the same way upon the individual. Literature and writing teachers ought to be apprised of this.

If reviews of professional writers are generated by connections made in context, student critics ought to be allowed the same latitude of response; moreover, the attention of the literature/writing teacher ought to be less upon the validity of the response given the teacher's expectations and more upon the establishing of a useful context for response and an encouragement to make connections as a basis for response.

If the notetaking of professional critics provides them with a means to relive the experience of the performance (or the book, I would add), the student critic ought to be instructed in the means to use notes, marginalia, and the like to get at the heart of the text *and* an understanding of his or her own reaction to it—to use notes as a way of generating his or her own idiosyncratic but analytically honest response to the text.

I don't claim to have solved any enduring mysteries here. As a scholar I'm always looking for evidence; as a teacher I'm always looking for application. As a scholar it seems to me that this study implies the need for another one, in which someone would attempt to learn what critics know *before* seeing a work, why they make the notes they make, how their knowledge and their notes affect their reviews; but as a teacher it is already clear to me that the prob-

lems my students have in writing works of criticism may lie less in their instruction in composition than in their ability to make connections in context. In quite a different way from professional critics they are too often writing in the dark.

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