

# **MOVIE/FILM REVIEW LESSON PLAN**

By Coop Cooper, A.K.A. "The Small Town Critic"

Website: <http://www.thesmalltowncritic.com>

## **Grade Level:**

- Middle School/High School

## **Subject:**

- English

## **Length of Time:**

- Approx. 3 class periods + homework

## **Description:**

- In this lesson, the students will create a written movie review using the concepts and skills learned from the teacher and the materials provided. The students will watch a movie in class and actively participate in all activities. Depending on the length of the movie and the depth in which the teacher immerses the students into the material, this could take three class periods or more.

## **Objectives:**

- Students will learn to:
  1. Analyze a narrative story structure
  2. Identify terms and concepts that serve the basis for movie reviews
  3. Synthesize literary/visual concepts into a structured essay

## **Materials Needed:**

- Movie (VHS, DVD, etc.) appropriate for high school or middle school students
- Notebook paper and writing instruments
- TV with a VHS, DVD or other media player
- Overhead projector if you plan to use transparencies
- Transparencies or copies of the instructions and examples

- OPTIONAL: Record an episode of “At the Movies” with critics Ben Lyons and Ben Mankiewicz or a similar show featuring movie critics discussing movies to show to the students. They could also look up clips from these shows online at <http://bventertainment.go.com/tv/buenavista/atm/>.

**Procedure: (note: These steps can be done at a quick pace, but I recommend a slow pace with in depth discussions and possibly small activities and scaffolding to maximize understanding and define unfamiliar terms. Ultimately the pace and # of days you spend on this is up to you.)**

- The teacher will pass out the “Movie Review Terms” (or have students copy them using an overhead projector) and go over the examples. Encourage students to offer their own examples for participation points.
- Then pass out copies of the “Review Template” and the “Movie Review Example” and go over them. Compare the two and highlight examples/ similarities on the overhead projector. Make sure the students understand the structure before proceeding.
- Pass out (or have them copy) the “Movie Review Worksheet.”
- Begin the film. Have the students fill out the worksheet as they watch. You may decide to grade them on attentiveness. Informing the students of this might ensure better participation.
- After the film, answer questions the students might have missed on the worksheet (ex – names of the actors/characters).
- Have them begin writing their reviews by utilizing all of their materials. They should finish it for homework if not completed in class, or you could have them spend a couple of days working on it in class and revising (highly recommended).
- OPTIONAL: Once finished, you could have students with completed papers come up in front of the class in pairs and do an “At the Movies”- type discussion utilizing the “Terminology” they learned from the lesson (for credit or extra credit).
- After that, you will collect the papers and grade them.

### **Evaluation and Grading:**

- The “Movie Review Project!” provides the necessary steps for evaluation and grading. Feel free to create your own rubric if you deem it necessary.
- Other means of evaluation could include student conduct during the watching of the film, completion of the worksheet and participation in discussions.

# MOVIE REVIEW TERMS

## **1. Blurbs –**

- When a quote from a review is used in a commercial/ advertisement
- (ex – “Better than the Matrix! I would see it again and again!”)

## **2. Critic –**

- A professional who publishes his opinion on a particular movie/ play/book
- (ex – Roger Ebert, Richard Roeper, Leonard Maltin, Pauline Kael)

## **3. Mediocre –**

- Competent but not especially outstanding
- (ex – “The film wasn’t bad and it wasn’t good either, it was just mediocre”)

## **4. Cliché –**

- Something that’s been used so many times that it no longer surprises or interests the audience; overexposure
- (ex – In a scary movie, a black cat jumps out and scares the character, but the real danger is RIGHT BEHIND HIM/HER!)

## **5. Character Driven –**

- When the characters in a fictional work develop over the course of the story into people you care about
- (ex – “Twilight” is about vampires, but more importantly, it’s the relationship between the characters that makes us care about the story)

## **6. High-Concept –**

- When the idea behind the story is interesting enough to get people to see the movie without knowing anything else about it
- (ex – A young clownfish gets kidnapped and put into an aquarium and it's up to his father and a misfit group of fish to save him {"Finding Nemo"})

## **7. Plot –**

- What the story is about
- (ex – "Kung Fu Panda" is about a clumsy, overweight panda bear who dreams of becoming the ultimate kung fu warrior, etc... {note that a plot summary is about a paragraph long})

## **8. Hype –**

- Using different techniques to get the audience excited about the story
- (ex – "Come see 'Coraline' in amazing 3-D! It's like nothing you've ever seen before!")

## **9. Out of Context –**

- When quotes are mixed up and changed around to give the words a different meaning
- (ex – The commercial says: "Roger Ebert calls 'The Big Crazy Movie' BRILLIANT!")
- What Roger Ebert really said in his review was, "The Big Crazy movie could have been BRILLIANT if the acting wasn't so terrible."

## **10. Puns –**

- A clever play on words
- (ex – "Waiting to Exhale" will take your breath away!)
- (ex – "Run to the theater to see "Running Scared!")

## **11. Editorial rights –**

- When handing over a review to a publication, the editor has the power to create a title and cut things out of the review
- (ex – YOU WROTE: “This movie stunk.” The editor changes it to: “This movie wasn’t so good.”)

## **12. Syndication –**

- When the same article is published in more than one newspaper or publication.
- (ex – The Associated Press takes one article and sells it to 300 newspapers and 1000 websites across the country)

## **13. Ratings system –**

- When the critic uses a scale to show the degree of how much they recommend the movie
- (ex – “thumbs up” or “four stars”)

## **14. Audience demographics –**

- When the critic recommends that only a certain group of people should see, or not see, the film
- (ex – “Kids will like ‘Madagascar,’ but adults will get bored.”)

## **15. Critical bias –**

- When the critic cannot review the film fairly due to a personal problem with something in the film
- (ex – I hated “Jaws” because I’m afraid of sharks.)

## **16. Spoilers –**

- When a critic reveals secrets and plot points that could ruin the surprise for the audience and lessen their enjoyment of the movie.
- (ex – In the end of “The Big Crazy Movie,” John the main character dies) Note: DON’T TELL SPOILERS!!!

# **MOVIE REVIEW PROJECT!**

Now that you have seen a movie in class, it is your turn to be the critic. You will write a page and a half review on the film.

The review must at least be **two pages long** – **10pts.**

These are things you need to include:

1. A title (headline for your review) – **5pts.**
2. The names of the main actors and the names of their characters (top 5 actors/characters) – **10pts.**
3. A summary of the plot of the story (without giving away the ending) - **10pts.**
4. A possible theme (or moral) of this story – **10pts.**
5. Give the “audience demographic” or who would like this movie – **10pts.**
6. Your opinion of the movie as a whole (include details you thought were interesting or awful). – **10pts.**
7. A score/rating system (other than “two thumbs up”) – **5pts.**
8. Include a very short biography of yourself at the end – **10pts.**

*Extra credit* – If you include a clever “*pun*” in the TITLE OF YOUR REVIEW, I’ll give you an **extra 5pts.**

- If you decide to *type* it, I’ll throw in another **extra 5pts.**

- Note: Write this review as if you were trying to convince someone who has not seen the movie to either see it or avoid it, and NO SPOILERS!!!

**Total possible score** (not including extra credit): **80 pts.**

## **MOVIE REVIEW WORKSHEET**

Fill out the following information about the movie:

**DURING THE MOVIE:**

1. Who are the 5 most important characters in the film? Also list the names 5 of the actors playing these characters.
2. What is this story about? Be very detailed!
3. What group of people would like this movie (demographics)?

**AFTER THE MOVIE:**

4. Did you like this movie? Why or why not?
5. What rating would you give this movie?
6. What spoilers might ruin the movie for viewers if you told them about it?
7. All movies teach a lesson (theme/moral). What did you learn from this one?
8. What title would you give your review (and can you think of a pun that might work for it)?

**MOVIE REVIEW TEMPLATE**

Note: DON'T FORGET that movie titles are written within "quotation marks!"

**HEADLINE:** Include the title of the movie (try to use a pun!)

**PARAGRAPH #1:** Introduce the movie by stating that you've just seen this movie and would like to give an opinion about it. Mention a couple of details that might help the reader understand what type of movie you are talking about.

**PARAGRAPH #2:** Summarize the plot (story). Where and when did it take place? Who are the main characters? What is the story about? Remember, do NOT include spoilers and do not tell how the story ends!

**PARAGRAPH #3:** Talk about the actors/actresses and discuss who did a good job and who didn't.

**PARAGRAPH #4:** Talk about what you liked about the movie and what you didn't like. Be sure to include specific details and scenes.

**PARAGRAPH #5:** What lessons did you learn from this story (theme/moral)? What do you think others will learn from it?

**PARAGRAPH #6:** What group of people would like this movie? Who would you recommend it to? Who would you not recommend it to? What's the MPAA rating of the movie (G, PG, PG-13, R, etc...)? What is your final word on the film: Is it good or bad?

**RATING SYSTEM:** Give the movie a score. You can do grades (A,B,C,D,F+ or -), stars (\*\* out of \*\*\*\*), numbers (3 out of 5) or something totally original... just don't use "thumbs up" or "thumbs down."

**SHORT BIOGRAPHY:** Explain who you are, what your school level is (freshman, junior, etc.), your job (if you have one), sports you play and interesting things you like to do. Talk about yourself in the "3<sup>rd</sup> person," that is; pretend someone else is writing the bio about you.

## **MOVIE REVIEW EXAMPLE**

## **TITLE: “My Dog Skip” will have you skipping to the theater**

By Coop Cooper, A.K.A. “The Small Town Critic”

Everyone remembers their childhood dogs and the impact they’ve had on their life. Perhaps one dog in particular sticks out in your mind... a special dog that was there for you in the toughest or best years of your life. That is what this screen adaptation of Willie Morris’ “My Dog Skip” conveys in a fun, nostalgic and heartbreaking kind of way. Morris recounts the autobiographical memoir of his childhood in Yazoo City, Mississippi and the four-legged friend that accompanied him on his journey into manhood.

Set in the backdrop of the war-torn world of the 1940’s, young Willie (Frankie Muniz) is on the verge of his ninth birthday. His only real friend, neighbor and high school sports hero Dink Jenkins (Luke Wilson) goes off and fight in WWII, leaving Willie feeling alone in the world. To lift Willie’s spirits, his mother (Diane Lane) decides to defy the wishes of his stern father (Kevin Bacon) and buy Willie a Jack Russell terrier puppy. The unusually smart and charismatic dog Skip quickly becomes a local institution and helps Willie gain respect, make friends and even win over his first girlfriend.

The young Morris is outstandingly played by Frankie Muniz, now a household name due to his success on TV’s “Malcolm in the Middle.” His acting is very mature and shows shades of emotions very effectively. Both Kevin Bacon and Diane Lane do decent jobs of portraying caring and concerned parents. Luke Wilson exceeds his normal comedy boundaries and pulls off the disgraced town hero with surprising effectiveness. However it’s the dog that steals the show... or should I say dogs. “Moose” (Eddie from TV’s Frasier) and his son “Enzo” play the older and younger Skip respectively. Look for them in more movies, commercials and TV shows to come. I guarantee you’ll see them.

Kevin Bacon and Diane Lane’s characters were strong, but didn’t get enough screen time to fully develop. Willie’s friendship with a young black boy was never given a chance to develop either, probably in an effort by the filmmakers to avoid focusing on the segregation issues of the time period. The issue is addressed, but I feel that the African-American characters should have had bigger, more substantial parts. Also, I didn’t get the whole

subplot with the evil moonshine dealers and why they tormented little Willie and Skip. It seemed like a fictional part that was slapped on to cause more conflict. Despite these objections, the entire production was shot so effectively that it seemed that it genuinely conveyed feeling of growing up in rural Mississippi. The attention to detail and the accuracy of the time period are phenomenal. I felt completely immersed in this world and felt the full effect of this moving story. Even the southern accents were much better than average.

The message of this film is very clear and invokes plenty of nostalgia to anyone who can identify growing up in a rural town. It's about passing into adulthood, remembering old friends long gone, and the desire to remember or relive happy moments in our lives that may be fading from our memory. Morris is certainly a master at preserving his own memories by writing it down for others to enjoy. I truly believe that this story is his gift, not only to the people of Mississippi, but to all who want to remember their past, and the friends they left behind.

This movie is PG, a rating which might run off some of the older crowd, but it's truly a movie for everyone. Most films geared for children these days depend on lame, pop-culture references and gas-passing jokes in a patronizing attempt to entertain the younger masses. This movie rises above all of that to become one of the most watchable non-Disney film for children since 1993's "Searching for Bobby Fischer." Your date might resist going, but try to talk them into it. They won't regret it and neither will you.

Scale of 1-5:

4 ½

*Coop Cooper is an independently syndicated film critic, living in Los Angeles. He is originally from Clarksdale, Mississippi and a Southerner at heart. He graduated from Southern Methodist University with a B.F.A in Cinema, and received his Masters in Screenwriting from the American Film Institute in Hollywood. You can read his past reviews at <http://www.thesmalltowncritic.com/>.*