



# Writing Killer Reviews

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# Writing Killer Reviews

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1. Why do we write reviews?
2. When do we write reviews?
3. How do we write a good review?
  1. Specific, Actionable, and Objective
  2. Observe, Interpret, Confirm (OIC)
4. Practice

## Review Frameworks

1. OIC
2. Review Triggers
3. Continue, Start, Stop
4. Flash Feedback

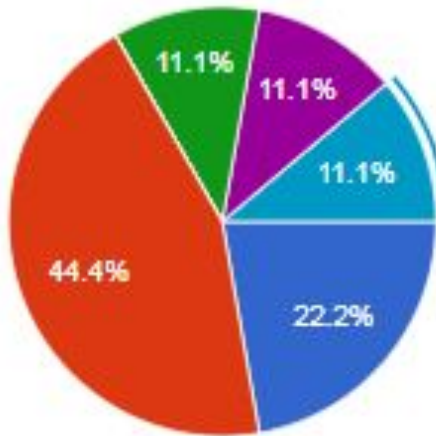


# Who's in the room?

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- Q1: How many reviews have you written this year?
- Q2: How many people like getting reviews?
- Q3: How many people *hate writing reviews*?
- Q4: In your groups, brainstorm for 2 minutes some reasons we should write reviews.
- Q5: Back to your groups for 2 minutes, why aren't more reviews written?

# Why do we write reviews?



- To complete a level up checklist
- Because I had a notable (good or bad) experience
- based on mandates from team leads
- When I feel I am able to enlighten another judge to things that are difficult to reflect on
- I enjoy helping others improve!
- I worked enough with the judge. I try to target one equal-or-lower judge o...



# Why do we write reviews?

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- ...because we had a notable experience
- ...because we were told to
- ...because we want to level up
- ...because we have something to offer

*“Giving feedback to other judges is the ultimate tool for self-improvement. When you stop to type up your notes after an event and write someone a review, you get immersed in a reflexive process ... [Y]ou retain up to 90% of knowledge when you teach others.”*  
-Antonio Zanutto





# Why do we write reviews?

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- Most of the time, we write reviews because **we believe that based on our interactions with a judge, we can teach some best methods or techniques for judging.**
- More experienced judges write more reviews;
- More senior judges write more reviews; and
- More confident judges write more reviews

*“Feedback is a tool of improvement, a statement of what one does right, and what should be improved. A crucial part of the development of all judges in every level of the program, for older/higher level judges a way to teach younger ones, for younger ones a way of getting the needed knowledge to become better and more fulfilled judge[s]”*

– Omar Gonzalez Lopez



# Why do(n't) we write reviews?

The review paradox: The people who write the most reviews (L2s and L3s) can learn the most about their mentorship from the people who write the fewest.

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- Reviews are a tool for good **teaching**, but get confused for *mentorship*.
- Good mentors are best **taught** about their own failures and successes from the L1s they're *mentoring*.
- L1s are mentored on, and can provide feedback on:
  - Feedback techniques!
  - Task assignments
  - Teaching rules, policy, and philosophy
  - Logistics



# When do we write reviews?

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- Provide feedback in a timely manner; there's no mandate, but don't wait too long:
  - Memory is imperfect
  - People judge other tournaments frequently (especially when you begin to judge at the GP level)
  - Judges will inevitably reflect on the event, so giving them context and perspective to do so is the entire goal of a good review





# When do we write reviews?

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- **Specificity** broadens your window for providing feedback:
  - Take notes! Good, specific examples will bring the judge back to the event floor
  - If feedback is too emotional (“you should be more extroverted!”), too academic, or too fluffy, it doesn’t carry strong resonances to help the judge reflect on their actions at the tournament
  - People will wait for well-written feedback, but don’t keep them waiting too long!

Good feedback is...

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# Good feedback is...

Different vantage points that allows the reviewed to reflect on themselves in a different light.

They are well written, focus on specific events or behaviours, and make suggestions for how to move forward.

Specific and actionable items for improvement.

Constructive criticism presented with action items which can help improve the element(s) of work being criticized

Direct speech (not beating around the bush), specific examples, suggestions for what to do next, context.

Specificity, focus.

clear examples



Specific

# Specific

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- When you provide feedback, start specific: Angela Aliff writes about an O-I-C review framework, outlining the steps to good verbal feedback as:
  - Observation
  - Interpretation
  - Confirmation
- Which, to fit with our decree of “actionability” here, correspond with the following verbs:
  - Observe
  - Interpret
  - Confirm

## Observe

Show the judge you were paying attention and provide them a context within which to consider your feedback:

Consider this example from Angela Aliff's article:

- **BAD:** *You were impatient*
- **GREAT:** *You rushed through that missed trigger warning so quickly and abruptly that the players were too stunned to ask for clarification till after you'd left.*

When we start with the interpretation (i.e. “your behaviour = you were impatient”) we start too general rather than specific.

In the first example, we've **interpreted** too quickly, without pointing out where or how they exemplified this deficiency. Making one rushed ruling is a problem for the player and we want to correct that, but the judge likely was not an “impatient” judge all weekend.



## Interpret

Use your observation as context to explain how repeating this behaviour will benefit or detract from the tournament:

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- ***BAD:*** *You seem like a rules robot who doesn't care about the players.*
- ***GREAT:*** *Your speed in communicating with the player, as well as your tone of voice, tell me that you weren't completely focused on the end goal: improving the player experience with clarity, consistency, and kindness.*

Interpret the potential impact of the scenario you observed if that behavior were to continue.

We may have a very specific example that may have had poor or unintended consequences, but what we want to avoid is saying that this person “seems” like anything, good or bad, and projecting based on a singular instance.

## Confirm

Check in with the judge to ensure your feedback was clear and fair, and to make sure the judge is “okay” with your feedback.

- When writing a review, make an attempt to avoid the “ambush review”
  - Let your subject know that a review is coming
  - Get their perspective on the days events; it might impact the way you write your review!
  - If you don’t get a chance to let them know, *you should still write the review!* Good feedback will take away some of the Ambush Viper’s sting.
  - “Surprise Reviews” aren’t always a bad thing, but consider role and relationship when writing!
- Use the commenting feature on JudgeApps to follow up as necessary.
  - Feedback is a loop, it is about both writing and reading
  - Getting better at writing means getting better at receiving feedback as well!

## Review Triggers

When someone receives feedback and they're *not okay*, reasons why usually fall into three categories.

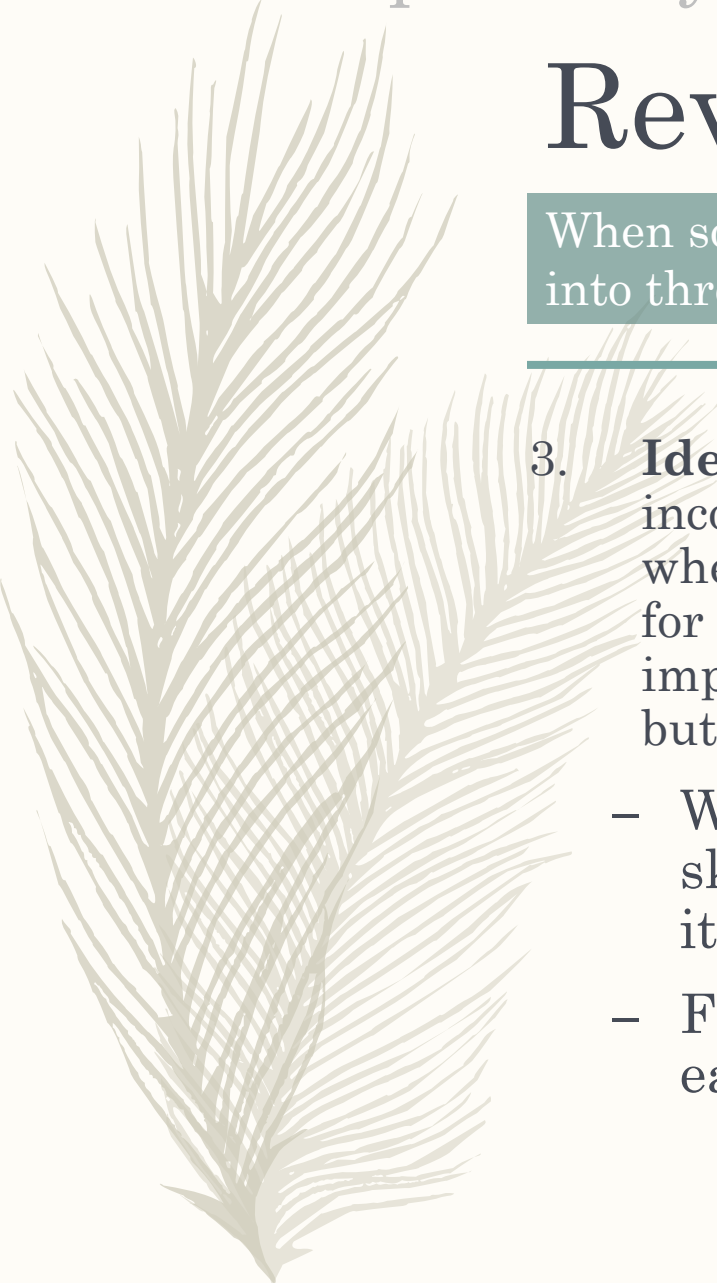
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1. **Truth triggers** – when the content seems *untrue*, inaccurate, or unhelpful, our reactions are indignant, angry, or otherwise wildly unimpressed.
2. **Relationship triggers** – change the way we receive feedback based on our relationship to the person giving it: if we don't like them, don't believe them to be credible, are in competition with them, or feel owed something by them, we reject criticism that might be accepted from someone else.

*“From my close observation of writers... they fall into two groups: 1) those who bleed copiously and visibly at any bad review, and 2) those who bleed copiously and secretly at any bad review.” - Isaac Asimov*

## Review Triggers

When someone receives feedback and they're *not okay*, reasons why usually fall into three categories.

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3. **Identity triggers** – the main focus of this section: feedback that is incongruent with your understanding of yourself. These triggers happen when, for example, we receive feedback that suggests we have a tendency for some kind of behaviour based on one instance of an action. What's important is that this feedback can be valid and our reactions can be valid, but still incongruous with one another.
    - When we receive feedback that makes us question our training / skills / experiences and the person we thought we were, it makes it tough to take.
    - Feedback needs to “complete the loop,” but we need to make it easier for people to recognize and listen to good feedback

## Review Triggers

**Identity triggers** especially (but all triggers generally) happen when we interpret before we observe.

- When we draw broad conclusions about a judge's skill or ability from one instance, we risk damaging their confidence.
- We're also committing a logical fallacy:
  - Singular is not universal
  - They could have exhibited the opposite "tendency" during the rest of the event, based on one opposing instance

*"...the feedback that I needed to learn these things induced a feeling of incompetence. As a result, I felt as though I were being called incompetent." - Jacob Milicic*



# Modify the review template to suit your review

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- Be specific:
  - Focus on the different tasks assigned to the team you're on
  - Avoid writing broadly about Strengths and Weaknesses; forcing your review to fit the template creates fluff, empty reviews, and contradictions
- Don't assign scores: unless you're writing for an L3 recommendation or self-review, don't lock yourself into a \*/5 metric
  - The reviewer might be shocked by the score and tune out feedback
  - Your feedback loses nuance as it gets shoehorned into 5 options
  - What's the difference between 80 and 100? What if someone is a 90?



# Example 1:

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“While his interactions with players were excellent, the delivery of his rulings could have been more confident. He sometimes seemed unsure of himself, and while he was correct, players are often quick to pick up on it.”

*Can we improve this?*



# Example 2:

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First of all, take the time to regularly write reviews of judges that you work with. I don't care if it's five sentences or five paragraphs, you need to make an effort to write these things down. Use the book I gave you to ensure that you have some material - it makes things a lot easier in the aftermath of an event

*Can we improve this?*



# Actionable

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- Think in verbs. What can the judge *do* to improve?
  - “*Speak clearly / slowly / louder*”
  - “*Engage players on their level; adjust posture to match players; use positive body language*”
- Then think of outcomes
  - “*So players can grasp / understand / hear what you need them to*”
  - “*To ensure players feel comfortable talking to you.*”



# Actionable

*“A less than positive review looks like a death sentence. It looks like a final judgement of what someone thinks about you as a person, when it’s really just a snapshot of a person’s perception. That perception absolutely matters. The key is finding where their perspective intersects with yours.”*

*- Brogan King*

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- When we think about outcomes first, it’s harder to follow feedback and that feedback can be discouraging:
  - “Ensure players feel comfortable talking to you.”
    - *How do I do that?*
    - *Are they currently uncomfortable talking to me?*
    - *Do you feel players don’t like me?*
    - *What processes does “ensure” comprise?*



# Ask yourself: “What did the judge do? Do I want them to do it again?”

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- Point directly to actions and specific scenarios, and use verbs to describe the behaviour
- If the judge spoke too quickly, say that;
- If the judge was rude or their actions were perceived as such by a player or other judge, say that (but don't tell them to be “more enthusiastic”)
- Focus on things the judge *can change with your help*:
  - “be more confident” is not helpful
  - “you're so eager that it doesn't seem genuine” is likewise not helpful
  - “read corresponding sections of the IPG before and after delivering a ruling until you gain more confidence” is helpful
  - “Complete the tasks you're assigned before volunteering for extra work” is helpful



# Example 3:

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During round 4 I shadowed you on a call that ended up being quite complex. A player said that he had picked up his deck to put scryed cards on the bottom, and one card had been knocked on the ground. He claimed it was from his hand but was concerned that his opponent would not believe that claim. An interesting call to say the least. You handled the count back very well, discovering to both players' satisfaction that the card was in fact from the player's hand.

*Can we improve this?*



# Objective

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- Bait and Switch: all reviews are subjective!
- Reviews are subject to:
  - Training, beliefs, and individual strategies
  - Individual instances
  - Differences of opinion
  - Eavesdropping and snapshots

*“Respect that feedback is a form of confrontation, and it can be difficult, anxiety-inducing, and even paralyzing for all parties. Remember that if someone wants to improve, they probably want your feedback. If somebody gives you feedback, they probably want you to succeed. Put your ego aside on both sides of feedback. - Jess Dunks*



# Objective

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- Objectivity accounts for:
  - Moods, personal differences, negative characterizations
  - Reputations
  - “tin gods” and straw men
- In short, objectivity seeks to identify best practices for judging as a whole, while avoiding pitfalls of unproductive personal biases towards a person or an event.

## Objective

Take the necessary time to reflect on your experience and evaluate the quality of the feedback you're giving

- Give yourself time to reflect, decompress, and collect your thoughts into an accurate and well-written review<sup>1</sup>:
  - If you're writing feedback that is especially critical, it can be draining and detract from your motivation
  - If your initial reaction is incredibly negative, take some time to decompress; negative feedback is still valid, but rants are not helpful
  - Rant to your colleagues in person if you need to, to get perspective and make sure that you're not being too harsh, or being impacted by relationship triggers
  - **Remember that we all have different mentors, expectations, and training, and that will impact what we expect from, for example, team leads**

<sup>1</sup>Long review  $\neq$  well-written review; indeed, Riki Hayashi's flash feedback initiative suggests trying to come up with a review for someone at your next event and limiting it 140 words. Giving someone an actionable, objective, accurate piece of feedback in that space is a challenge, and will give you pause the next time you think "I don't have enough content to write a review"

## Objective

Constructive criticism is about delivery, not content; impact, not intent. Give feedback that your subject can build on

- Constructive means, quite literally, “serving a useful purpose; tending to build up”
  - It **does not** mean: “negative”, “bad,” “critical,”
  - A good review gives your subject something to do next time, but *not always* something to change
  - Use *Continue*, *Start*, *Stop* to frame your review writing:
    - Reinforce things they should *continue* doing
    - Suggest things they should *start doing*
    - And you may not be left with many things they should *stop* doing,
- **But you’ve still created a plan for growth!**





# Example 4

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For example, there were times when you instructed various pairs to do 2–3 deck checks in a round. While it was fine to stay low pressure and not mandate doing 3 checks, you also could have followed up with (or shadowed) pairs and offered advice (or shown techniques) on how to do more checks in less time. No, it didn't affect the integrity or efficiency of the event, but there's always room for improvement, right?

Quote from the reviewee – *“This feels a little flippant toward the end; more helpful would have been to directly encourage a proactive approach to coaching. Rather than end with the “it's not important” bit, the review should have ended with a “go forth and do this” bit”*



# Example 5

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"Your presence with other judges is not as strong as it is with players. There are more pauses in it, and your attitude is inconsistent. It is effective enough to get a job done, but doesn't give off the same 'holy s-----, this guy is good' vibe as you have with the players. I once had this problem, and for me, it was because I felt I didn't need to give that extra energy around colleagues that are competent. There is some truth to this mentality because most of the time, other judges will get the job done with little direction, but to get the job done really well at something like round 8 of a GP, some holy s---- vibe goes a long way.

If having strong enthusiastic presence around other judges doesn't come naturally to you, you'll just have to force it. Even now when I'm in charge of other judges, I'm constantly reminding myself to stand up straight, walk around the floor with purpose, and give out energy to the people on my team/staff when we're meeting. It's a pain in the ass, but just keep reminding yourself. "energy; purpose." It may never come naturally, but there are some clutch skills that you'll never be naturally perfect at it."



# Example 6

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Even so, REDACTED could inspire even greater confidence in other team members by taking a little extra time upfront to describe his "ideal head judging process/experience" so team members have a clearer blueprint to deliver it, as well as, taking an extra moment or beat for a "check in" with team member from time to time.

Specifically, when I indicated that I wanted to focus on "end of round" (EOR)...that was taken to mean I wanted to "team lead it". There was no clear communication that I was being made the lead based on this request, nor was there a "check in" to say either, "Here's some ways we can accomplish that, which do you prefer?"

Thankfully, REDACTED let me know what I did that hindered my ability to help him as the HJ by my own "made up" EOR procedures. Further, I do not know that he specifically tagged the "Appeals Judge" to mentor me. However, she did (and I suspect it was at his delegation.) If this is correct, this effort would be more appreciated by your team members if communicated to them in another quick "check in".



# How to a Write a Killer Review, Review:

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1. Be Specific:
  - Observe an action then interpret the impact.
  - Customize the JudgeApps template to focus on specific tasks or events
2. Use actionable feedback
  - What did the judge do? Should they do it again? What should they do differently?
  - Start with actions the judge can take and describe the benefits of doing so
  - Continue, Start, then Stop



# How to a Write a Killer Review, Review:

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## 3. Remain Objective:

- Take time to decompress
- Make notes to keep your thoughts organized
- Don't let feedback be coloured by rigid structures like “positive, negative, positive”; if you don't have negatives, don't try to write them!
- Try to focus on relevant tasks, rather than your favourite “tin gods”



# Practice!

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- In your groups, with the materials provided, create a piece of “Flash Feedback” for our first presenter:
  - Be Specific – Observe, Interpret, Confirm
  - Be brief and cut the fluff – **What** did they do and **why** do you think it was positive or negative
  - Remain objective, and help your reviewee remain objective
    - Keep your feedback to content or to actions that can be improved (“You seemed nervous” is not particularly helpful in this format)





# Now, go forth and write me a review! \*evil laugh\*

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- Submit feedback in a JudgeApps review



# Sources

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- [“What’s your 100.”](#) Angela Aliff. *The Feedback Loop*.
- [“Buying In”](#). Brogan King. *The Feedback Loop*.
- [“Identity Triggers: Who tells your story?”](#). Jacob Milicic. *The Feedback Loop*.
- [“Find the Coaching in the Criticism”](#). Harvard Business Review. *The Feedback Loop*.
- [“Leveling up your verbal feedback.”](#) Angela Aliff. *The Feedback Loop*.