

Reviewing for *Cleveland Magazine* and *Northern Ohio Live*

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When the newly established *Cleveland Magazine* asked me to be their first movie reviewer in the early 1970s, I thought it would be a lark, a pleasant diversion from my more “serious” academic writing. The experience changed my life. It made me a better writer and a better teacher too. It also made me quite a bit of money.

I was fresh out of graduate school, where I had been taught the “Proper” way to write an academic article. Writing in Academia is called “research” and you’re expected to thoroughly investigate what’s already been said about your subject. You’re also expected to demonstrate the exhaustiveness of your efforts in the introduction of your scholarly essay. This does not make for very compelling reading.

Implicitly, I was also taught to write in a proper academic style. That means lots of fancy abstract terms, tortuously lengthy sentences—preferably with lots of dependent clauses, to demonstrate that you can keep several thoughts in your head simultaneously—and a lofty “elevated” diction. Expressing yourself simply, with everyday words, would almost certainly elicit patronizing smiles from prospective editors. And of course, academic writing thrives on footnotes. Lots of them. This shows that you’ve *really* done your homework. It’s like parading your loot.

It didn’t take me long to realize that this kind of writing was the kiss of death in magazines. You had to grab your readers’ attention in the opening paragraph. Why should they continue reading unless you’ve piqued their curiosity? Word choice had to be more concrete, more idiomatic. Sentences needed to be shorter, more to the point. Jargon and technical terms had to be eliminated, or at least minimized.

Taking a lesson from my teaching, I began writing each review with a set of questions: What do my readers need to know in order to understand this movie? What’s special about it? Why should they spend their money and time on it? What should they be looking for in order to appreciate it more? What are its shortcomings? These are all common-sense types of questions, the same kind of questions my students asked in class.

When reviewing Fellini’s *Amarcord* (one of my favorite movies), I thought it a shame that only local audiences would read the piece, so I decided to submit it to an academic journal. To my astonishment, the article was accepted by *The Western Review*, a prestigious publication.

After that, I no longer wrote in two styles. In fact, I liked the article so much I recycled part of it again, in my college textbook, *Understanding Movies*. It’s been a best-selling textbook ever since the 1970s. I’m currently working on the 9th edition. My editor tells me that film professors like the book because it’s written clearly and simply. It doesn’t sound like other textbooks.

In short, if I had never written for popular magazines early in my career, I would probably still be grinding out dry, footnote-laden academic articles that no sensible person would want to read. Isn’t life ironic?