



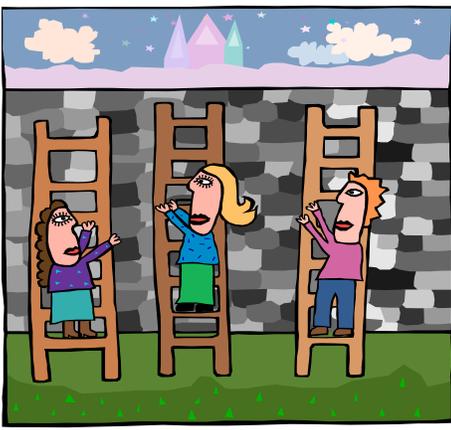
Jean Reidy's

Breaking Down the Book:

A Kid-Friendly Guide to Writing Bomb-Diggity Book Reviews and Book Reports

Have you read a great — or maybe not-so-great — book? Well, tell someone about it. Writing a book report doesn't have to feel like brain surgery. It's easy once you know how to break down the story into bite-size pieces.

Ready to give it a try? Let's get going.



The Secret to Sensational Summaries

If I asked you to tell me what your book was about, I'll bet most of you could tell me, in detail, the entire story. The hard part comes when you only have a few paragraphs to explain the whole book. How do you figure out **what's important?**

First, while you read, make a movie of the story in your head. Picture the key scenes. Remember how you felt during each. Next, let your book sit for a few days after you've finished it. Your mind may weed out many of the unnecessary details. Now use your mental movie to explore the plot.

The plot of every novel involves a **main character trying to reach a goal**. But in order for his story to be interesting this character must encounter **problems (obstacles/conflict)** and **take action** to overcome the problems so that he can reach his goal.

So let's start by filling in the blanks in this sentence:

This book *title of the book* is a story about *name of main character or characters* who *briefly describe the first thing that happens to that character that gets the story on a roll* and wants more than anything *fill in the main character's goal* so that *reason character wants what he wants*.

Let's use this **Summary Sentence** to take a closer look at the story.

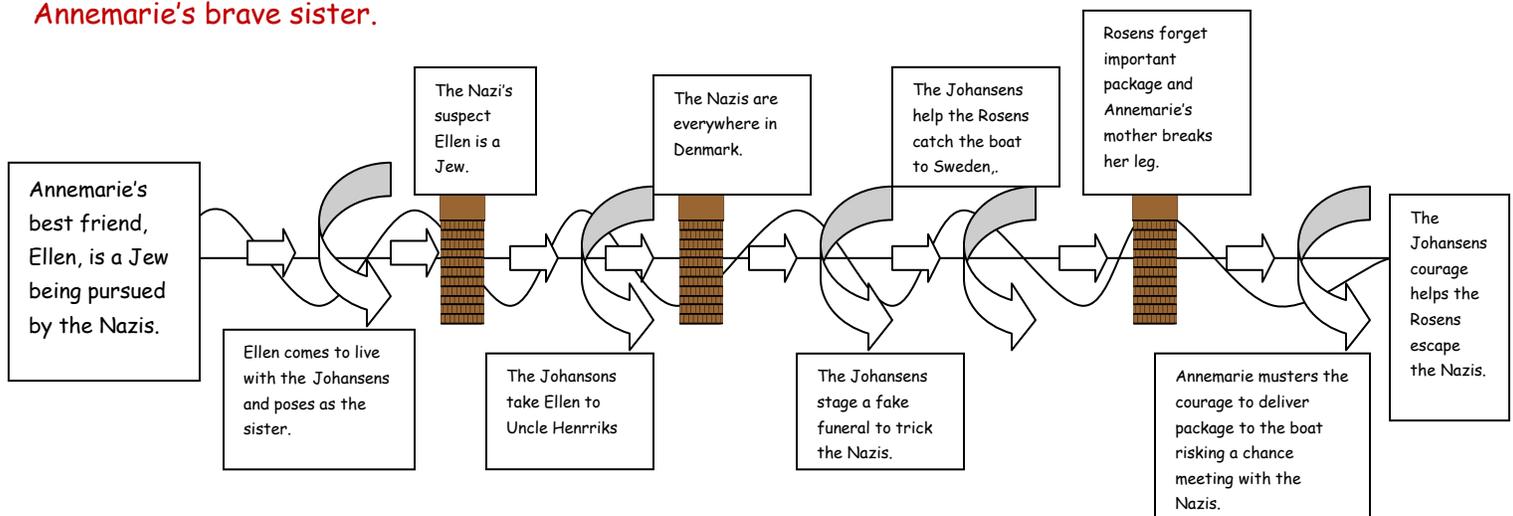
Plotting the Plot



Do you understand something better when you draw a PICTURE of it? If so, try this. If not, read this anyway – it's good stuff!!

1. Draw a line on a piece of paper. That's your plot line. (This is easy, right?)
2. At the beginning of your plot line, write the **first thing that happens to your character** that gets the story going (from your Summary Sentence). At the end of your line, write in your character's goal (also from your Sentence). **The goal** and the "reason character wants what he wants" will give you a clue about the theme.
3. Now between the first event and your character's goal, fill in the **major problems** (obstacles, conflict) he encounters on his way. How do you find these major problems? Ask yourself the question, "Does this event get in the way of my main character reaching his goal?" The last problem is usually the worst.
4. Now fill in your main character's **actions** or turning points that **move him past** those problems and toward his goal. These problems and actions make up your **important summary events**.
5. Draw a curvy line that weaves in and out of your main plot line. Label it with the **theme** (we'll talk about that later) and significant **subplots**. How do you decide if a subplot is significant? Ask "Can the main character move along the plot line without it?" If so, get rid of it.

Here's a plotline for Lois Lowry's *Number the Stars*. Notice the curvy line. That's the subplot about Annemarie's brave sister.



6. Take one last look at your plot line. Does everything on it represent a **key element** to the story? If not, get rid of it. If so, great! You have all the elements for a sensational summary.

Now we're ready to start writing!

Recipe for a sensational summary

1. Describe your main character and the situation he finds himself in at the beginning of the story. (1-2 sentences)

Having trouble getting started? Check out *Banishing Bad Beginnings* on p.7.



2. Explain what the main character wants or needs most. (1 sentence)
3. List the problems (obstacles/conflict) getting in the way of the main character getting what he wants or needs (1-3 sentences)
4. Tell how the main character gets past these obstacles? (1-3 sentences)
5. Describe the worst and final problem the main character encounters. (1 sentence)
6. Sum up how the main character get past that final problem and if he gets what he wants. (1-2 sentences)
7. Recap what you and the character learned by the end of the story. That's' the theme. (1 sentence)

You may be wondering, "What about other characters? What about setting? What about subplots?" The answer: **If they're critical to your summary the facts will come out in the answers to the questions above.**

Once you've written your complete and creative sentences, juggle them around until your report flows. Read it out loud. How does it sound?

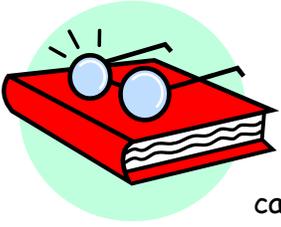
Great?

Then you've written a sensational summary.

But what did you think of the book???



Reviews to Rave About



You've written a killer **lead**. You've **summarized** the story. But did you like the book? That's what curious readers really want to know. **Critiquing** a book is like taking a case to court - you have to support your opinion with facts.

Critiquing Tips

Think while you're reading. Do I like this book? Am I bored? Do I hate it? Does it feel long? Do I stay up late just to read the next chapter? **Why?** **Dig deep** into why you really liked or disliked the book. Try out different ways to say how you feel about it. If you're having trouble putting it into words, talk it out with a friend or adult.

Ask Why? over and over. For example: I disliked the book *Artemis Fowl*. **Why?** It was boring. **Why?** I didn't like the title character. **Why?** He was an evil kid with an adult mind. **Why?** The author gave him an adult voice and evil actions. **Any other reasons you didn't like the book?** I didn't sympathize with any of the characters. **Why?** The book was so action-driven that I didn't get to know them. **Any other reason you didn't like the book?** I don't like stories about fairies. You're done asking "why" when you've uncovered specific facts about the book that support your critique.

Ask: Who might like the book? Then you'll be able to recommend it to specific readers. And they'll love you for it.

Explore factors that may be driving why you love or hate a book.

Language/Narration - Even though the first-person narrator and title character in *Crispin* sounds formal as in the ways of old England, his humble voice is likable and not snobby.

Characters - The reader will fall in love with Timothy in *The Cay* as a beloved father figure who guards and sacrifices his life for Phillip.

Setting - Count Olaf's house in *The Bad Beginning* features every detail necessary for a reader's gentle fright - creaking stairs, crumbling steeples and evil eyes gazing from every wall.

Plot - *Hatchet's* high adventure plot of survival teems with life or death situations. Just when the reader thinks things are going along fine, another high-risk situation is thrown at the main character. But Gary Paulson always gives the reader enough hope and breathing room to continue.

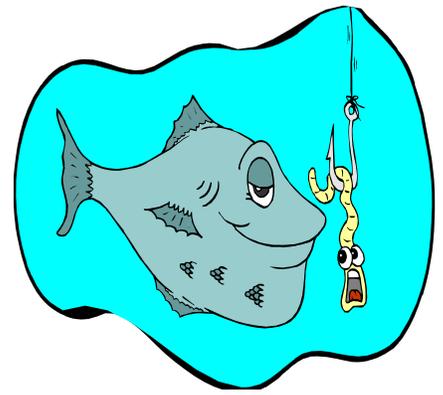
Theme/Message - Any young reader will relate to the fear experienced by Annamarie in *Number the Stars*, and the courage and responsibility it takes to act in spite of that fear.

Write it. Save space in your report for your critique so you don't have to cram it into one or two sentences. Or sprinkle your comments throughout. Beat out boring words like interesting, creative, fun, good, nice, and bad. Need more help? See **Six Suggestions to Make Your Writing Sing** on p.7.

Ready to spruce up your report? Start by

Banishing Bad Beginnings

Hook your readers with your first sentence or they might be snoring before they get to your good stuff.



Great Ways to Start a Report

1. **Ask a Question:** Not a boring question like "Do you like baseball?" Think of a question that ties to your book and grabs your reader like "Have you ever dreamed of pitching a no hitter? What about hitting a home run? Or being voted MVP? Sometimes it pays to dream big. At least it did for Scott Hampden in *Baseball Braindrain*." Or how about "What do you do when your teacher hates you, your best friend dumps you and your parents ground you for the next fifty years? Find out from Tilly Pakowski in *I'm Quitting the Fifth Grade*."
2. **Find a Fun Quote:** Start with your favorite line from your book or find a famous quote from another source that incorporates the theme of your story. Here's an example. "When Neil Armstrong said 'One small step for man, one giant leap for mankind,' he hadn't met the wheelchair bound main character of *Max Is On a Roll*." Or "Girls are nothin' but trouble," says Henry Hart in Benjamin Burke's *Love is for Lu-sers*. But when Henry meets Lulu, who has the latest video games, a perfect spiral football pass and sparkling blue eyes, Henry has to eat his words."
3. **Set a Scene:** Zoom your readers into the middle of your story. "Imagine waking on a lifeboat, bobbing over cresting waves on the Pacific. It's nighttime. Your family's disappeared. You're all alone. So you think. But there, just on the bow of your lifeboat, crouch an orangutan, a hyena and an enormous Bengal tiger."
4. **Short and Sassy:** Make one powerful statement and your reader will be begging to know more. Here's one "Jennie Holiday absolutely hates Christmas."

Advanced options for beginnings:

A Definition: Nothing boring here. Must be witty or unknown and of course tie to your report.

A Command to Your Reader: Like "Don't try this at home" will capture the reader's full attention and keep him reading.

Surprise, Shock, Set up an Opposite:

For practice, try starting your report using two different techniques. Then pick your favorite.

Six Suggestions to Make Your Writing Sing



1. Try out **different** types of openings or **leads** - surprise your reader.
2. Read your piece out loud. Do you like the rhythm? Or does it sound like blah, blah, blah, blah. If your rhythm is blah, **vary your sentence length and sentence structure**.
3. Use parallel structure for emphasis or lists.
4. Using a black pen, circle all the verbs in your piece. Star your **strong action verbs**. Those are keepers. "X" out all forms of the verb "to be" such as "is" "was" "are" "were" and "am." See if you can rewrite your sentence to replace "to be" verbs with action verbs.
5. Using a blue pen, circle all the nouns in your piece. "Keepers" paint a vivid picture without adjectives. "X" out lifeless nouns such as *girl, man, building, animal*, etc. Exchange them for **descriptive nouns** such as *Princess Fiona, Mr. Doosledorf, Golden Savings State Bank* and *hermit crab*.
6. Using a red pen, circle all **adverbs and adjectives**. **Eliminate** some by coming up with a better noun or better verb. Ask yourself, "Is this adjective or adverb necessary?" Clauses may also signal a weak noun or verb. Test this technique below by finding a better noun or verb for the phrases in italics.

Mr. Troutwine is *the man who lives next door*.

The Santa Shoppe is not for adults but only for *school kids*.

Aladdin lived in a *hot, dry land*.

Prunella *hopped happily from one foot to the other* down the sidewalk.

Poindexter *threw the snowball hard by snapping his wrist*.

Freda *acted like she was cold*.

Hildegarde *yelled loudly in a high pitch*.

Rufus *ran fast* from the playground.

Now put it all together. You'll have one **bomb-diggity** book report.
And in case you're wondering what "bomb-diggity" means —
it means **"better than fantabulous!"**

Jean Reidy is an award-winning freelance writer and the author of four upcoming children's books: *TOO PURPLEY!* and *TOO PICKLEY!* (Bloomsbury Children's 2010) *MY OWN LITTLE PIECE OF THE UNIVERSE* (Hyperion 2011) and *THERE'S A CORNER IN MY HOUSE* (Hyperion). Her articles and essays have appeared in over fifty other publications including *FamilyFun Magazine*, *The Christian Science Monitor*, *Guideposts for Kids*, *The Writer*, *The Denver Post*, and *The Rocky Mountain News*. Visit her at www.jeanreidy.com.

