

# The Critic

## The Critic

From One Critic to Another

*This is a basic introduction to the Cappies for a **Critic**.*

Hello! I'm Emily Woodhouse, a critic from Baltimore Cappies.

Guess what happens when you volunteer. I offered to help out with training materials, and write a letter explaining all the whos, whats, whens, wheres, and whys of being a critic, and the powers-that-be said "go for it," so I did. I hope you won't mind that it's kind of long, but I remember all the questions I had when I was just starting out, and I wanted to answer those. Plus, to be honest, there are a few ways in which those powers-that-be at Cappies Central wanted me to lean on you a little bit, so bear with me when those come up. You'll have a great time as a Cappies critic, but you need to know what's your part of the bargain.

## Getting Started

### What is the Cappies?

Critics get this question all the time, from interested audience members, parents, teachers, friends, strangers, et cetera.

It helps to have a simple answer ready. Tell them the Cappies is a program through which high school theater and journalism students are trained as critics, and then attend and review each others' shows, under the supervision of mentors who are mostly teachers. The best-written reviews are selected by the mentors and forwarded to local newspapers, for publication.

The point is to create a fun learning experience for students who like theater or journalism (or, like me, both those), and to make high school plays and musicals more exciting and get them more good publicity.

The Cappies got started right after Columbine, as a way of celebrating the good things about our generation. How it came to be is an interesting story, and you can read about it on the web site. The people who run it, internationally and in your area, are all volunteers. Your teachers are volunteering their time too, so you can be a critic. All good stuff, don't you think?

There's obviously a Cappies program in your area, which your school has joined, or you wouldn't have gotten a binder with my letter in it. In case a friend from some other part of the country asks you about how to be a Cappies critic, somebody in their area has to start a Cappies program first, and then their school can join. There are currently 15 Cappies programs nationwide, and the number keeps growing. Check the home page at [www.cappies.com](http://www.cappies.com), and you'll see all the places where there are Cappies.

You'll find a lot more than that at the Cappies web site ([www.cappies.com](http://www.cappies.com)). It's quite helpful, if you're a new critic, and it's full of all sorts of useful links. You can read news stories about the Cappies, learn about the various programs across the U.S., see reviews that got published, and lots more. On the home page, there's a letter you can download and send to college admissions committees telling them what they should know about you being a Cappies critic.

### Learning Who's Who

Every school in the Cappies has **Critics** (like me and you), a **Lead Critic** (who handles the schedule and make sure everybody at the school follows the rules), an **Advisor** (to oversee critics like you, and help in a school's overall involvement in Cappies), a **Mentor** or two (to supervise critic discussions, and select and edit reviews -- you'll meet plenty of mentors soon), and a **Show Director** (the director of a school's own Cappies-reviewed show). Often, the same person fills all three roles. Other times, the roles are split. If so, you'll need to know who's doing what at your school. Each school also has a **Booster** (a parent, who helps with the Cappies room and other stuff).

Every Cappies program is run locally, with its own **Program Director** (who will send you lots of emails), a **Chair** (who makes sure rules are applied correctly, and who leads the **Steering Committee**). Some programs will have a **Web Coordinator** (to handle the program's pages on the Cappies web site), a **Critic Coordinator** (sort of a "lead Lead Critic"), and other people. You'll probably get to know most of them, over the year.

Overseeing it all is the **Cappies Governing Board** (based in the National Capital Area), **Vice-President** Jane Strauss, **Co-Presidents** Alecia Lewkowich, Katie Lewis-Prieur, **Chief Information and Technology Officer** (Adam Campbell), and **CIS Team** (originally led by Jeff Arnold and Samarth Keshava). You might hear from some of them, from time to time.

## Turning in Your Parental Authorization Form

There's one thing you totally must do before you can be a critic. If you're under 18, one of your parents needs to sign the Parental Authorization form (or if you're over 18, sign it yourself), and give it to your Cappies Advisor. If Cappies officials don't have your form, you might be sent home when you arrive to review your first show (no joke!). Basically, this form says that the Cappies program can't be responsible for your transportation or other aspects of your safety while you're at a show or going to or from shows.

## Getting Trained

To be a Cappies critic, the first thing you need to do is get trained. You're doing that, and (I suppose) reading my letter is part of that. It's important to read everything in your binder. Some of it is introductory stuff you might want to read only once, but other materials (like the Award Category Guide) are things you should study and refer to as you do your critic work through the year. The forms you'll need are in here too. If you ever get down to your last post-show form, you should make more copies -- or you can download them on [www.cappies.com](http://www.cappies.com), on the "Rules & Forms" page.

It's important for every critic to know the rules. There are lots of rules in Cappies, and when I started out as a critic, I wasn't so sure about all that. Since then, I've learned that having all these rules is quite a good thing (really), because that's how everybody knows what's expected, and how everybody can be sure the reviews and voting are done fairly.

The way you can make sure you know all the important rules is to have a meeting of your Critics Team, early in the year, before you review any shows. Your Lead Critic needs to know the rules inside out, but as long as you know the basics, you'll be fine.

When you become a critic, you'll be registered on the famous Cappies Information Services, or as everybody calls it, "CIS" If you don't know how to log in or use your password, your Lead Critic can help you. CIS handles nearly everything in the Cappies. Throughout the year, you will receive notices via CIS about what show you are assigned to see. It's where you can volunteer, decline, and check shows where you've been assigned. CIS is also the place where you will write a review for the show you just saw so it can be forwarded to the mentors. You'll get emails from CIS telling you if your review got picked to be published (yay!) or if your review is late (oh-oh!).

As you can see, the Cappies is a very 21<sup>st</sup> Century program, and CIS is all-powerful, which means you've got to be web savvy -- about three things, in particular. First, you need to learn how to use it. There are instructions for that in your binder, and if you can't figure them out, ask your Cappies Advisor or Lead Critic. Having CIS also means that internet availability is extremely crucial to being an effective Cappies critic. If you don't have an online computer at home, talk to your Cappies Advisor, and see what can be worked out.

Third, you need to make sure you're getting Cappies emails. If you're not, that can mean one of two things. Either CIS has your email entered wrong in its database, or else your spam-guard is blocking Cappies emails. If you think your email is entered wrong, alert your Cappies Advisor or Lead Critic, who can help you fix that. If you ever change your email address or phone number, be sure to enter any changes right away on your CIS page. If a spam-guard appears to be a problem, there's a way to un-block all emails coming from [cappies.com](http://cappies.com). If you don't know how to do that, ask your Cappies Advisor or Lead Critic.

When you get Cappies emails, read them. If you don't, sooner or later something will happen that you should have known about but didn't. As a Critic, you should check your e-mail at LEAST every other day, to see if you've gotten any news from the Program Director or CIS.

## Keeping Your Schedule

*I'm a critic! So...now what do I do?*

The first thing to do is read all the materials in your Critic Binder. The second thing is to learn how to use CIS, and make sure you know how to log in.

The next thing to do is to plan your schedule. As a critic, you'll need to review at least a certain number of shows over the course of the year. If you don't, you won't be able to vote, and if your team doesn't review enough shows, your own school's Cappies show might be disqualified from awards. For most Cappies programs, the minimum number is five, but it might be less in yours. (If so, they'll tell you.) Whatever the minimum, you can do it. If you can't, why are you bothering with training?

Early on, your team will have a schedule. If you're like most critics, you're part of your school's Critics Team, which can have up to 6 people, and your Lead Critic will set it, based on a round-robin selection process kind of like an NFL draft. (It can get pretty brutal.)

If five is your program's minimum show number, per critic, your team will be assigned to five shows. At least half of your team has to review each of those assigned shows. If that doesn't happen, your team will get more shows assigned to it, and you don't want that to happen, or you'll start getting way behind, and the next thing you know, your own school's show could get DQ'd. If a show assignment turns out to be a huge conflict for most critics on a school team -- like if prom gets scheduled on one of your assigned dates -- your Lead Critic can ask to make a switch, and that's usually possible.

If you can't do an assigned show, you should tell your Lead Critic and (very important!) decline on CIS. If you don't, you'll end up on the assignment list, your school's Cappies Advisor (a teacher there) will get an email about it, and you don't want to have to dig your way out of that one. You can also volunteer to see extra shows on CIS. I do that, and there are some critics on my team who have reviewed a lot more than the minimum. You can decline shows on CIS, but remember: if you decline a show, make sure you volunteer for another one to fill your quota. You don't want to be ineligible for voting just because you missed one show!

Last year, I was a critic on what's called a "Regional Team." That happens when your school has more than six critics. Each school can have three extra, as long as they agree to be part of a Regional Team. Those are assembled by your local Cappies Program Director, who then assigns those teams to shows that might not otherwise have enough critics. Often, those are shows during the busiest theater weeks of the year. What this means is that Regional Team critics really shouldn't be part of their own school shows, because under the rules, if you're a Regional Team critic, you might have to review a show even if it's on the same night as your own school show.

If you're a Regional Team critic, you might get taken off a show that has maybe too many critics and put on another show that doesn't have enough. You'll be told about that awhile in advance, and you can decline the new show if you want, but don't sign up to be a Regional Team critic if these rules don't work for you.

## Preparing for a Cappies Show

When you're assigned to a show, CIS will send you three reminders -- two weeks before the show, one week before, and two days before.

If you're assigned to a show, you'd better go. It's not fair to the host school if you're on the attendance list but don't show up, since they're setting aside a ticket for you, arranging for a Cappies room, providing nice refreshments, etc. If you have to back out, try to do that at least two days before the show, so the final attendance list won't have you on it.

If you get sick or your car breaks down, at the last minute, try to decline the show on CIS before curtain time. Otherwise, your school's Cappies Advisor will get an email asking why you didn't show up, and you don't want that to happen. If you don't show, you will be asked to pay for the ticket the host school set aside for you!

A day or two before you see a show, do a little background research to alert you to whatever you are going to see. It's easy, on the internet. Just Google the show's name, and see what comes up. Going into a show with a blank mind is risky, as it sometimes allows you to become more easily bored.

I hate to bring this up, but I'd better: Make sure you're dressed nicely. You know what I mean -- nothing formal or fancy, but nothing sloppy either, just something appropriate and reasonably professional. Regular school clothing is usually fine, but come on, no sweatpants, please! Just remember, you're a guest with a free ticket, so you should be respectful to your host -- and you're representing the Cappies.

## Going to (and from) a Cappies Show

You should work out with your parents how you're going to get to shows. Nearly always, you'll have to get there by car, and a show may be at a school you've never been to, down roads you don't know. On CIS, you can get a Mapquest map of where the show will be. (It's usually at the school putting it on -- but not always, so you'd better check that.)

Here's a very big tip. Drive safely. Even if you're late, don't rush. If you get lost, get help the best way you know how. If you have a cell phone, bring it with you (be safe, don't drive with it!), and make sure it's charged.

Here's an even bigger tip. Carpool, preferably with a parent (yours or somebody else's) who knows the way and is a good driver. I know, being a critic is for you and others on your team, not for anybody's parents, but as far as the school putting on the show is concerned, the more the merrier -- and you won't see the 'rents from the time you get to the school to the time you're ready to leave. They'll find other moms and dads to talk to, before and after. The best part about this is that you know you'll have a safe ride to and from the school, and you know your parents won't be home worrying about that.

On your way home, though, you have to remember not to tell anybody who isn't a critic, and that includes your parents, about anything that was discussed in the Cappies room. (More about that later.)

Some critics carpool with other critics. If you want to do that, make sure it's OK with your parents first. And if someone else is riding in a car you're driving, make sure you know and obey the state laws about whether you can drive other teenagers. If there is a curfew (midnight?), you might need to plan around that. Sometimes there are exceptions for events at schools, but I've heard about places where that's not the case. Cappies shows are supposed to end by 10:30 PM, but you still need to do discussions and Critics' Choices after that, so there will be times when you won't be leaving for home until well after 11. Unless a show is a long way from your home, you should make it back by midnight.

If you're driving, or even if somebody else is, make sure you give yourself enough time to get to the show on time -- which, for Cappies, means 45 minutes before curtain time. Depending on where you're going, and especially if it's rush hour, give yourself some leeway for a little getting-lost or getting-stuck-in-traffic time. It's not great to get there too close to curtain. You can miss the opening discussion and have to play catch-up later about who's eligible for what category. If you get there less than ten minutes before curtain, the school can take back the ticket meant for you -- which they probably will, if it's a sellout, and you'll have to go home without seeing the show. If you get there after curtain, even if the school lets you in, the mentors might not let you review and score the show. (That will depend on whether you missed anything important, and it's totally up to them, so don't take that chance.) A professional critic wouldn't arrive at a show late, and you shouldn't either.

If your plan is to have somebody pick you up after the show, make sure you call them as soon as the show is over, with your cell phone or somebody else's cell phone (it's evening calling hours, which shouldn't cost them anything) or a pay phone, if you don't have any other way. Ask them to come to the school about a half hour after whenever the bows were, and tell them they may have to wait a little while.

It's not a good idea to have to wait at the school for your ride to come along. Under the rules, one of the mentors can't leave until after the last critic has been picked up, and they need to get home too. Sure, maybe you'll feel a little awkward having a mentor stand next to you, late at night, while you're waiting for your ride to show up, but that's better than standing there alone, late at night, at a place you don't know -- which is why, under the rules, they have to wait there with you. If for any reason your ride is late, make sure you find and tell a mentor, so the mentor will wait with you.

It's totally fine -- actually, it's a good thing -- to invite friends or family members to come with you to a Cappies show, but they can't go in the Cappies room at any time (even before the show), and they can't sit with you. They'll need to come as early as you do (45 minutes before the show) and stay as late as you do (45 minutes after the show, or maybe later, if it takes longer). They'll have to buy their tickets. If the show's a sellout, there might not be any tickets left, so it's a good idea for anybody who comes with you to call the school's theater department in advance to make a reservation. Maybe you can do that for them.

Sometimes new critics ask if they can see the same show on a different night. There's a short answer to that one: No. If you want to review and score a show, you have to be there at the same performance as all the other critics. Suppose you really like the show and want to see it again, maybe with a friend. No again. What if the other show is a little better, or not as good? If so, that could affect how you'd score the show at the end of the year. You can only see a show once.

## Going to the Cappies Room

When you get to a Cappies show, go right to the Cappies Room. Look around -- there should be signs leading you there. People at the ticket window should be able to help you find it.

The Cappies Room is where you'll have your pre-show, intermission, and post-show discussions. It's also where you can get refreshments, provided by the parent Boosters of the host school (thank you!). Yes, it's important to thank them, if you see them -- and to clean up before you leave. As critics, we want to be good guests. It's fine to sit with your friends, as long as you stop talking when the discussion starts.

Maybe you have friends at the school whose show you're there to review. If so, you can't say hello, or even wave to them. A professional critic wouldn't do that, and you shouldn't either. Be "all business" while you're there. Your friend will understand.

When you get to the Cappies Room, check in with the Editor Mentor, who will then check your name against the attendance list. At each show, there are two mentors, an Editor Mentor (who takes attendance) and a Discussion Mentor (who leads discussions). They are almost always teachers, and they are the authority in the room. You need to listen to them respectfully, like you would a teacher. They're volunteers too, and like you they want to have fun with this, and they'll appreciate anything critics can do to make everything go smoothly. At some shows, there may be a Cappies official there too.

If you get there when you're supposed to (45 minutes early), you can spend some time having refreshments, looking through show programs and other materials the school has provided, and maybe talking with friends (or making some new ones). Twenty minutes before show time, the Discussion Mentor will start a pre-show discussion, to talk about the show and important details of that particular production, including about some of the award categories, especially tech.

## Watching the Cappies Show

A few minutes before curtain, the usher will come get everybody. It's kind of exciting to walk into the theater with all the other critics. Usually, you're the last ones seated, and you're filling up a big block of seats right in the best part of the theater, so everybody notices you coming in, especially with your binders. You should have your binders with you, so you can take notes. Be sure to have something to write with, and it works best if it's a pen that makes a fat stroke, so you can see what you're writing in the dark. You're not supposed to use a pen-light, because those can be very distracting when the cast sees them go on and off during a show.

During the show, watch and listen carefully. Stay focused. Before you review your first show, read carefully through the Award Category Guide, which tell you the rules, along with what to "Keep in mind" and what to "Look and listen for" in a Cappies show.

While watching the show, don't discuss your opinions in the audience, even in a whisper. Some audience members may be very interested to know what the critics think of the show, while others may grow annoyed with your poor audience etiquette, so you'll need to be careful. React normally to the show. You don't have to be a deadpan, serious reviewer throughout the evening. You are an audience member, so laugh and clap as you see fit.

## Having Discussions

There's another discussion at intermission, when critics discuss what they have seen so far. Don't just fill a chair -- take part! Everybody's there to learn a thing or two; it's kind of like a director's workshop, and nobody's getting graded, so it can be quite fun -- as long as everybody listens as well as they talk. Share any notes or opinions that you think are important. If other critics don't have the same opinion you have, don't take it personally. Critics often don't agree. The large discussion allows everyone to say what they felt about certain parts of the production, and hearing what others think can help you make up your own mind about various aspects of the show. Don't be afraid to pitch in and join the discussion. It's a free-for-all, so put in your two cents!

Make sure, though, that you respect the mentors the way you would teachers in class. They're volunteering their time, and it's important to make the Cappies fun for them, too. One way to do that is not to have little side talks during the group discussions. Also, while it's fine to state your point, try not to be show-off-y, and don't try to put anybody else down.

Even if you don't like a show, try not to rag on it too much. Even a weak show has good aspects, and when you see one of those it's important to talk about what positive aspects you saw that you can write about in your review.

After intermission, you'll go back for act two. During bows, it's usually a good idea for a critic to do pretty much what the rest of the audience is doing. You shouldn't start a standing ovation -- let the parents of the performers do that, which they probably will -- but if you liked the show, it's fine to stand too. If nearly everybody in the audience is standing, it looks kind of strange for the critic section to be full of people who aren't standing (you can bet that the cast would notice that!), so try not to do that, even if you thought a show was only so-so.

If it's closing night, and the school is giving everybody flowers or something, the rules say that the school has to let you leave the theater before all that. There's supposed to be an announcement excusing critics from that, but if there isn't, the mentor is supposed to gesture to you all to stand and exit the theater as quietly as you can.

When you walk between the theater and the Cappies room, during intermission or after the show, it's often tempting to say a few words about the show to another critic, but you should try hard not to do that. You never know who may be a few feet away listening. If someone from the host school asks what you thought of the show, the best thing to say is that you're a critic and not supposed to talk about a show, even if you like it.

You can't hug anybody at the school after the show. Wait until after you write and send in your review. Then you can call, email, or visit anybody you want how much you liked the show. But you can never ever tell anybody what was said in the Cappies room, by you or any other critic, or what the Critics' Choices were.

There's another discussion after the show ends, where critics discuss what they liked and what maybe could have been better about the whole show, and fill out the nomination and scoring sheets.

All the discussions are mandatory, including the post-show one. The discussion after the show is supposed to last about 45 minutes, but it sometimes takes longer -- and you can't leave before it's over, unless you're sick or something. (If you feel sick, you can leave at any time, but you need to tell a mentor -- and if you don't see the whole show and stay for all the discussions, you can't review it.)

Picking Critics' Choices can be fun. All the critics who saw the show need to decide on one Critics' Choice for each award category. That's the person (or group) whose name will go on the ballot when you vote for awards at the end of the year. The main point is that you're always trying to pick the "best in show" for each category. If the lead actor is also the best vocalist, comic actor, and dancer, then that's who your Critics' Choice should be for all those. (That doesn't happen much, but it's often true that you'll want to pick one person in two categories.)

In the Cappies room, it usually happens that various critics have strong opinions about whether to pick this person or that person for this or that. A lot of times, there's a huge debate about what's the best song in the show. When you discuss these Critics' Choices, or take votes to decide them, make sure you respect everybody else's point of view -- and help the mentors move things along, so everybody can get home at a decent hour.

If there's any disagreement about who is or isn't eligible to be a Critics' Choice, the Discussion Mentor needs to pin this down. The rules require the Discussion Mentor to consult with all the Lead Critics who are at that show, either quickly by consensus -- or (if need be) by having a quick meeting while everybody else waits. If you think a wrong rule interpretation has been made, you can email the Program Director, explain the situation, and see what comes of it.

Once everyone has decided on the Critics' Choices, then you need to score them all. At this point, you're just making notes to yourself that you'll use when you vote. That's when the scores are for real. The evaluation sheet you'll fill out after each show (they're in your binder!) is something you have to turn in to the Mentors before you leave, and they'll be kept safe and given back to you on Voting Day to help you remember how you liked the show.

Even though your post-show scores aren't supposed to be final ones, do them thoughtfully. Take as much time as you need to do it right, especially the first show or two, as you're learning the ropes. You can't show your scores to others on your team. They're yours, and they're private.

The Cappies uses a 10 point scoring scale, which you'll find at the bottom of the sheet. An average score is about a 5. Read what the form says. Think about a 9 or 8 as a really good score, a 7 or 6 as a good score, 5 as an average score, 4 as on the low end of average, and 3 or 2 as not very good. You should only give a 10 for something that's amazingly incredible, or a 1 for something colossally terrible. The Award Category Guide has some very good pointers to think about when scoring each category. Your first time or two, look through those while you're scoring. After awhile, you'll know what to do, and it'll go faster.

If you want, and this is totally optional, you can also make notes to yourself about nomination and award points ("N" and "A") in the space next to where you mark a number score. These points are an important part of voting. I don't want to confuse you here, so I'll try to keep this simple. For every show you review, you'll get five nomination points, and one award point, to hand around anywhere you want (well, pretty much everywhere -- you have to give one-fifth of them to tech categories). So if you review five shows, you'll get 25 nomination points and 5 award points. You can give them all to one show, if you really want to do that, but you can only give one point per candidate.

Yeah, yeah, I know, I'm breaking my promise not to confuse you, but all you need to know now is that, after a show, if you want, you can mark a few N's and A's next to people you think might deserve nominations or awards. Or, if you want, you can wait until when you vote to worry about those points. All you're doing is making notes to yourself that you'll use when you vote, and believe me, it'll make a lot more sense then.

Once you leave the Cappies room, *don't tell anybody* what the Critics' Choices are. If you do, you could make a lot of people upset and angry, from the show director to a lot of people on the cast. And you could get yourself removed from the Cappies roster. So that's a great big *DON'T*. Speaking of don'ts, don't assume that all these rules about confidentiality don't apply to the internet, because they do. Be careful not to say anything in chat rooms, text messages, personal blogs, or anywhere else about whatever went on in the Cappies room -- or what you thought of a show.

## Writing a Review

Any critic will invariably tell you the hardest part of being a critic is sitting down to write that review. Organization is key, and the sooner you start writing it, the better. Getting words out while the show is still fresh in your brain is better than scraping your memory for details right before the deadline hits.

*What should I write about? How long should my review be? How can I be fair in my criticisms?* There are some materials in your binder that can help here, and you should definitely read those -- especially if you want to get published (which, of course, you do). Let me give my own tips.

Try to use a basic plan whenever you want to review a show. The Seven Paragraph Plan (in your binder) is a good one to use when you're starting out. Before you begin writing your review, organize your notes. Make sure you know what actors you want to highlight in your review, what tech stuff you want to touch on, what criticisms you want to make.

On the whole, Cappies reviews are pretty positive. We're not out to rip apart performances like you sometimes see in the professional critic columns in newspapers. Make sure you remember that just as you are not a professional critic, you are not watching professional actors or stage technicians. These are real reviews, though, and we can and do make criticisms. We have to follow the rules, and you need to learn about those. The main thing is not to criticize anybody by name, and not to pile on the criticisms too thick. Think of it this way: *When you want to praise, be specific. When you want to criticize, be general.* Read "A Mentor's Message," and you'll get the drift of what to do to stay within the rules or, better still, to get picked for the papers.

Some critics may think the way to get published is to praise everything in every show, but that's totally not true. There are four factors the mentors have to consider when picking reviews for the papers. The first one is honesty and accuracy. The second one is the quality of the writing. The third one is name-spelling. The third factor is that your review has to be mindful of the consensus of critic opinions during the discussions. If the critics were broadly praising a show, then the mentor are encouraged to select reviews that do the same. If the critics were a little lukewarm (or less than that), then the mentors are supposed to select reviews that are a little, well, measured in their praise, with criticisms that reflect the gist of what was said in the Cappies room. Sure, you can and should express your own point of view in your review -- but if you write a rave review for a show that was getting raves only from you, don't expect it to be selected to be published in a newspaper.

The mentors saw the same show you did, and they're not going to select your review if you go over-the-top about something that was only a little better than average, or if you don't point out a flaw that everybody with eyes and ears had to notice. But don't be harsh either. In other words, don't write a review that's going to make someone cry because you insulted them, and don't write a review that's going to give someone an ultra ego from your constant praising, especially if they don't deserve it.

The fourth point is name spelling. That matters, a lot, to newspapers. Be careful with that. Refer to your show program. You wouldn't want to see your own name misspelled in the papers.

Try to discuss a wide range of elements in your review. Don't limit your review to the acting. Add in technical aspects, history of the show, information about the performing school, or a plot summary. You can write about any aspect of the production, whether student done or not. However, don't stay on one topic for too long.

How much of the underlying story should you tell? Not too little, and not too much. You don't want to explain the entire plot in your review, just the basics so the reader has an idea of what the play is about. Remember, the review is supposed to critique the performance, not the script.

Make sure you spell all the names right (including performers, characters, the performing school, etc). Recheck them in the show program to make sure you have the right name and spelling. Students, parents, and (especially) newspaper editors can get pretty upset when misspelled names appear in print (mine was misspelled once when I was published -- everyone was wondering who "Emily *Whitehouse*" was). So you'd better spell all names correctly, if you want to get published.

Reviews should typically be about 300-400 words long. Any less and there's no way you could fully describe the show that you saw to the audience of readers. Any more and you might become too long-winded to publish. If you have a lot to say, a little longer might be all right, but don't go over 500 words. Fully explain the show that you saw, but don't ramble on about every actor and every detail.

After you've written your review, proofread it. Proof for names, spelling, grammar, and punctuation. Lastly, proofread to make sure that *you* are happy with the review you are sending in. It's your work and you should be able to take pride in that fact.

Speaking of "your work," don't even think about copying something off an internet site (including published reviews on the Cappies' site), pasting it into your review, and passing it off as your own writing. That's called plagiarism. In the real world, it gets you fired and can wreck your career as a writer. In the Cappies, it can get you suspended or even permanently barred from being a critic. Mentors and program officials occasionally spot-check for this, and you don't want to embarrass yourself and your school by getting caught for plagiarizing.

It's all right, and within the rules, for a friend or family member to look over your review for typos or spelling errors, or to make sure you make your points well. Just remember, though, that they can't write your review text for you. It's your review, not theirs.

Send it in on time. CIS is like an airport gate. If you're late, you're late, and once that door is shut, it's shut, and no one cares about how fast you ran to get there. Almost always -- and you'll be told if there's any change -- you'll need to send in your review by 10 AM Sunday (if it's a Friday night show or earlier), by noon Sunday (if it's a Sat mat), by 2 PM Sunday (if it's a Saturday night show), or by 9 PM Sunday (if it's a Sunday mat). If you're one minute late, your odds for getting picked for the papers fall through the floor. If you're a day late, your Cappies Advisor will get an email saying you didn't get your review in. If you're three days late, your review won't be accepted.

If you're like me, you'll always aim for 15 minutes before the deadline, in case you have last-minute computer problems. If you're a few seconds late and get a review tagged as late, it's your own fault.

You have to use CIS to send in your review. If for some reason you have trouble with CIS, there's a help desk you can reach on the CIS gateway page. If you forget your username, that's easy: It's your two-letter school code, then a dash, then the first letter of your first name, then the first seven letters of your last name. (My school is River Hill, Cappies initials "rh," so my username is rh-ewoodhou.) If you forget your password, it's really easy to get a new one. Just go to the log-in page, click on the "forgotten your username or password?" link, and enter in your email address. If it's in the database, CIS will automatically email you a new password right away.

If CIS isn't working for some reason, check the [www.cappies.com](http://www.cappies.com) home page to see if CIS is down. That's really rare, but like with anything on the internet, stuff happens. If that's the case, you should send in your review to [critic.xxx@cappies.com](mailto:critic.xxx@cappies.com) ("xxx" isn't like the movie name, but just where you put the three-letter code for your Cappies program, so if you're in my Baltimore program, you'd send your review to [critic.bal@cappies.com](mailto:critic.bal@cappies.com)). But don't ever do this if CIS is *not* down, or you won't get credit for your review.

If your review is selected for publication, you will be notified by e-mail as to which paper it will be in. The reviews chosen for the papers are edited by mentors and newspaper editors, sometimes a lot, so brace yourself for some changes you might not be expecting. The changes are typically very subtle, such as moving words around in a sentence or replacing a word with a better one, but sometimes the published reviews have to be cut down for space.

Not every review sent to the papers is published. That depends on the paper, and on how much space they have that week. You'll have to watch on your own to see when it gets published. For some papers, you can check on-line. Since the reviews generally appear in papers near the school giving the performance, you may need to go some distance from where you live to find the paper that contains your review.

If you're not published, you can still feel that your review counts. Every review is important to the performing school. All reviews are forwarded to the cast and crew to read, so lots of people are going to look at your review. If you praise someone, or criticize something, it'll be read. Often, they get plastered all over the walls and stay up for weeks for all to see. Sometimes they get quoted in ads the school runs, or posted on web sites. The only exception is if your review breaks the rules, the mentors can decide not to send it to the school.

The performing school is nearly always ecstatic when they receive all the critics' reviews. Most casts study the reviews in depth and celebrate when they see the reviews in the newspapers (with pictures of the cast included). Sometimes, if a show is running for a second weekend, a quote from your review may end up in a newspaper ad -- even if your review wasn't published!

## Helping Host Your School's Cappies Show

Having the Cappies come to your school to review a show is a Big Deal, so make the absolute most of it!

Getting ready for your school's Cappies show is mostly a job for parent Boosters, but you can help. Have a room set aside for critics to hold their discussions in, and post signs to help critics find the room. It is ideal to have an usher escort the critics back to this room, so no one gets lost and misses the pre-show discussion. The Boosters can arrange for refreshments for the critics. You can help them get all the needed material in the Cappies room, including programs and information about what aspects of your show is student designed and eligible for awards. Your Show Director needs to fill out a Cappies Show Eligibility Form to give to the mentors, and maybe you can help with that.

In the theater, make sure somebody ropes off an appropriate number of seats for the Cappies, giving them the best seats in the house. You want them to be able to see and hear everything you do on the stage! In the auditorium lobby, set up a few chairs for any family or friends of critics who have to wait for the after-show discussion to end.

Try to make your own school's Cappies show as special as you can. Tell friends, parents, teachers, and anyone else who strongly supports your drama department that they really should come to the show that night. You never know, but a large audience that reacts well to a show and claps very hard at the curtain call can help influence critics' opinions. Even if it doesn't do that, it sure can energize a cast and crew to do great work. For your Cappies show night, think of some additional, original touches for the school entrance and lobby. If anything a little over-the-top comes to mind, give it a try. Some schools try to theme their room decorations to match the show.

After your school's Cappies show, leave the critics alone to do their work, even if some of them are your friends. It's against the rules to meet and greet them -- or to ask how they liked the show -- or (especially) to ask what the Critics' Choices were. Please remind your own school's cast and crew not to try to find out the Critics' Choices. Tell them those Choices will be published right after awards voting, before nominations are announced, and try to explain how important it is for everybody to help maintain the integrity of the "Cappie" awards voting process.

## Voting for Awards

Near the end of the year, the pace of the Cappies program really picks up. The last couple of weeks will probably contain a lot of shows. You'll need to get enough reviews in so you can qualify to vote. It's best if you don't wait until the last weekend to get your last reviews in.

As soon as you can, find out when voting day is, and try to arrange things so you can be there. You won't want to go through the whole year, review lots of shows, and then not be able to vote.

You'll vote by computer, online, at a central place. You'll use an awards voting system specially designed (by two teenagers!) especially for the Cappies. You only vote on shows that you've seen, and you vote in several ways. You "ink in" your evaluation scores. You give people award and nomination points. You rank everybody you saw in the same category. It may sound a little complicated, but it's basically very easy to understand. Before you vote, you'll be emailed more instructions about this, and when you vote, there will be an adult "proctor" around to help you do it right, and to fix any glitches.

When you vote -- especially if you're part of the first few groups to do so -- watch for any names on the ballot that are different from those on your form. If you find any, tell a proctor right away, so Cappies officials can look into it. After they do, they'll tell you what to do with that award category.

Right after you vote, the numbers are crunched, and the nominees are announced within a day or two. They announce critic nominees, too. Every Cappies program has a "team" award, along with individual awards. Depending on your program, there may be awards for female critic and male critic, or awards based on year in school. The critic awards are based on how many reviews you do and how many of them get picked for the papers.

In many places, the local papers print huge photo spreads of the main nominees. Star athletes always get this attention--now high school theater stars get the privilege, too! This is the most exciting part of the Cappies season, leading up to the amazing Gala!!!

## Going to the Cappies Gala

The year's hard work concludes with the most fabulous night of the year: the Cappies Gala. Each Cappies program has its own Gala where the results from voting are announced in a style reminiscent of the Tony's. This is the night where the talents of critics, actors, dancers, signers, and tech people are awarded -- it's everybody's turn to shine.

The Gala is the most fun you can have with the Cappies. It's a formal event, so everybody's dressed to the nines, which only adds to the electric atmosphere. Even if your school doesn't win awards, it's still tremendous fun to know that you helped make such an evening possible. It's also a lot of fun to watch the excerpts from shows and cheer for the winners as they make their short acceptance speeches. It's so awesome to see schools cheering other schools on.

If your school doesn't have many nominations -- or maybe none at all (this happens, in large programs) -- you should still go to the Gala. You saw quite a few shows, and your votes helped determine who got nominated and who will win the Cappie awards, so you'll have a great time even if your school isn't mentioned very often. Anyway, the whole point of being a Critic wasn't to win awards for your own school, so you really should go to the Gala, no matter which school gets however many nominations.

## Maintaining the Integrity of the Cappies

What goes on in the Cappies Room stays in the Cappies Room. You can't reveal what was said, who the Critics' Choices were, or how you scored anything -- not to your parents, not to your friends, not to a teacher in your school, not to anybody you know at the performing school, not to anybody. That's a very important rule. Think how you would feel if you heard rumors like that about your own school's show.

The Cappies really is a great program, so if you're going to be a critic, aspire to be a great one. If you put your full effort and enthusiasm into it, it will yield great results and you'll have the most fun of your life doing it.

What'll you get out of it? You soon could end up reading your own words in the local newspaper, as a published theater critic. You'll learn a lot, improve your writing and understanding of theater, see some great shows, make some terrific new friends, help boost high school theater in your area -- and, you never know, you could end up reading your own words in the local newspaper. But that's not the most important thing.

Here's what matters most.... Have fun!

**Emily Woodhouse**  
Critic, River Hill High School  
Cappies of Baltimore