Dear Mrs. Skorupski:
An Occasional Advice Column with
Mrs. Skorupski, LMS @ Your Service

Skills, Skills, Skills
Before you go even one step further, Reviewer, you’ll want to conduct a skills assessment to be sure you are well-prepared for the job. To begin, one of the reasons that school librarians make such excellent book reviewers is that we are so deeply involved with books. We buy them, we read them, we share them with students and teachers. Even with the new age of social media and online information, we still spend a fair amount of time with books—whether in print or electronic.

Familiarity with Literature
In addition to our familiarity and professional involvement with books, we possess other desirable skills. The first of those is experience with literature. Many of us, myself included, were college English literature majors. Linda Lucke, learning center director at Butterfield Elementary School in Libertyville, Illinois, who reviews for *A Book and A Hug* (www.abookandahug.com), falls into that category. As English majors, we learned to read critically and formulate a written critical commentary, which is, after all, what a book review is. As Linda says, “I have great experience with all kinds of literature, and have read constantly for 30 years, so I have a large literary experience to compare current literature to.”

Perhaps even more important is our career experience with the field of children’s literature. As Kristy Dempsey, children’s author, librarian at The American School of Belo Horizonte in Minas Gerais, Brazil, and reviewer for *The 4:00 Book Hook Newsletter* notes, “I think it’s a benefit that I read so widely in children’s literature, which not only makes me a more knowledgeable reviewer but helps me to identify holes and niches into which certain books fit.”

Grades K–2, 3–5

Signed,
Reviewer in Rehoboth

Dear Reviewer,

What a fabulous question this is, and I’ll bet you are not the only school librarian who’d like to jump into the growing pool of school librarian reviewers. The water is warm and the task is certainly fun. Since you are just at the beginning stages of this enterprise, you have a lot to consider and a great deal to learn. And November is just around the corner! So okily dokily, let’s get this swimming lesson underway.

Keep ’em Reading • by | Toni Buzzeo
Knowledge of Children

Beyond our experience with children’s literature, we are supremely knowledgeable about children themselves. “I think my experience as a librarian and my day-to-day interaction with children gives me unique insight into what works (or doesn’t work) and what will appeal (or not appeal) to specific age groups,” says Kristy. And Betsy Ruffin, retired librarian-technologist and current volunteer at Cleburne (Texas) ISD elementary schools who reviews for Library Media Connection points out that she also has a firm grasp of the audience she is writing to—library professionals.

Knowledge of Curriculum

Likewise, we are knowledgeable about the curriculum. School librarian Terri L. Street from Longfellow Middle School in Norman, Oklahoma, reviews for the Oklahoma State Department of Education’s online review source, Gushers and Dusters, as well as for NetGalley (www.netgalley.com) and her own book review blog, StreetReads (www.streetreads.wordpress.com). She says, “I think the main skills I bring to reviewing are an understanding of young people and knowledge of curriculum gained from over thirty years in the classroom and the school library. I recognize books with ‘kid appeal’ as well as those that are perfect for inclusion in units of study, and I have experience in designing activities to introduce and extend the reading experience. I believe activity ‘germs,’ as Judy Freeman calls them, enrich a review in the eyes of both school and public librarians.”

Writing Skills

Of course, the job of book reviewing isn’t all about reading, literature, and the curriculum. It’s about writing too! However, the writing skills required for review writing are quite specific. Cheryl Youse, media specialist at Colquitt County High School in Moultrie, Georgia, and reviewer for her local newspaper, the Moultrie Observer agrees. “I can write without spelling and grammatical errors, and [most importantly] I can tell enough about books to interest people without giving away endings.” Cheryl Whitmore Stevens, librarian at Tolland (Connecticut) High School and reviewer for Library Media Connection possesses these skills as well. “I have the skills to condense the themes and plot of a book into a few lines that tell the reader what they need to know about the book.”

Combined Skills

Blake Norby, media specialist at Chapel Hill (North Carolina) High School and reviewer for Voices of Youth Advocates (VOYA) makes an important point when she brings those skill sets together: reading, knowledge of children/teens, and writing. “I have an undergraduate degree in creative writing, so I have a basic understanding of what good writing looks like, and I live and breathe YA lit for my job, so my high interest in all things YA helps me a lot. It also helps to have those open communication lines with teens so I know what would interest them or not.” As in most endeavors, it’s the marriage of skill sets that helps us to excel.

Objectivity

One essential skill that can’t be overlooked is the need for a reviewer to be objective. “I think I bring a certain objectivity to reviewing that is essential. If my initial reaction to a book is dislike, I ask myself very careful questions as to why—is the topic just not of interest to me, or do I have valid objections in terms of writing style, accuracy, timeliness, etc.,” says Grace Oliff, librarian at Ann Blanche Smith School in Hillsdale, New Jersey, and reviewer for School Library Journal.

Organizational Skills

Two final skills that you might not have considered are quite important to reviewing: organization and the ability to meet deadlines. Not only will you need a system for recording requested and received titles for review, since most reviewing is deadline-driven, you will need to be timely with the task. Kelly M. Hoppe, librarian at Palo Duro High School Library in Amarillo, Texas, and reviewer for Library Media Connection considers punctuality as one of her top skills as a reviewer. “I always have my reviews completed and submitted before they are due.” If you are not currently well-organized and prompt, you may want to work on those skills before undertaking reviewing.
Benefits
Like you, Reviewer, many school librarians review because they are interested in their own professional development. And many of the benefits of reviewing do fall under that general category. It’s interesting, though, to hear why our colleagues love what they do. I asked four of them what they considered to be the top three benefits of reviewing as a librarian. Here’s what they had to say:

Katie Lawrence, school library media specialist at St. Stanislaus Kostka Elementary and Patrick Henry Elementary Schools in Chicago, Illinois, and reviewer for *Library Journal*:
1. Experiencing new books in advance.
3. Having the opportunity to be involved with a different aspect of my career that school librarianship does not expose me to.

Roxanne Mills, retired library supervisor, current university supervisor at Old Dominion University in Norfolk, Virginia, and a reviewer for *Library Media Connection*:
1. Following publishing trends.
2. Opening new books, some of which have not been published yet. Librarians love a new box of books.
3. Keeping my reviewing skills current.

Debbie Wenk, librarian at Rachel Carson Middle School in Herndon, Virginia, and reviewer for *VOYA*:
1. Reading books ahead of publication. My students love it when I can tell them about a sequel that’s coming or about a new book of interest that is on the way. If they show enough interest, I loan them the ARC.
2. Adding new books to my library collection at no cost!
3. Having an “in” when there’s a sequel coming out that I’m dying to read!

Kristine Widner, librarian at Fr. Edward Wieland Library at Holy Apostles School in New Berlin, Wisconsin, and reviewer for many journals and organizations including *Catholic Library World*, *Christian Library Journal*, and Carthage College Center for Children’s Literature:
1. Receiving free books. I’ve received book series worth hundreds of dollars and access to World Book database—also worth $1,000+.
2. Garnering recognition. My hourly salary is very low, so it is a boost for me to see my name in print.

That is a difficult list to beat, isn’t it? Who wouldn’t want sneak peeks at new books, thousands of dollars in free books for the collection, and expanded personal knowledge and skills, all while seeing one’s name in “print,” and assisting other librarians?

Drawbacks and Challenges
Of course, as with any worthwhile endeavor, reviewing isn’t without its drawbacks and challenges, and it’s wise to consider these before committing to the job. For example, as mentioned above in the Skills section, deadlines are an ever-present pressure. MaryAnn Karre, school librarian at Horace Mann and Thomas Jefferson Elementary Schools in Binghamton, New York, and current reviewer for *Library Media Connection* says, “The drawback of reviewing for numerous sources is that they all seem to send items at the same time!” And even if you are reviewing for a single source,
High School and reviewer for both *School Library Journal* and *Audiofile* adds, “I’m not afraid to tell the truth. I’ve written a number of negative reviews and it’s never easy, but I see it as providing a service and saving fellow librarians money.” And, even though she finds it difficult to write a negative review, Marcia Kochel, head librarian at The Galloway School in Atlanta, Georgia, and reviewer for *School Library Journal* and on her own book blog ([omsbookblog.blogspot.com](http://omsbookblog.blogspot.com)), makes an important point. “I believe there aren’t enough negative reviews out there—librarians do deserve to know when something isn’t good. Reviewers are generally too kind.”

So Reviewer, what do you think? Do your skills match those necessary to the task? Are you eager for the benefits of reviewing children’s books and strong enough to shoulder the challenges? Do you have the time, energy, and enthusiasm you’ll need to meet that goal you set? If so, you’re ready to begin. You’ll find an excellent collection of advice for those who’d like to launch a reviewing career on pages 6-8. As you begin, keep in mind the excellent advice of Raynette Schulte, young adult librarian at Watertown (South Dakota) Regional Library and reviewer for the South Dakota Library Association YARP Committee, “Read, read, read. And read other reviews. Then, when time permits, read, read, read some more.” You’ll definitely be off to a good start.

Signed,
Mrs. Skorupski, LMS @ Your Service

Toni Buzzeo, MA, MLIS, is an author as well as a career library media specialist. She is the author of seventeen picture books, most recently *Inside the Books* (UpstartBooks 2012) and *Stay Close to Mama* (Hyperion 2012), as well as many professional books and articles. Visit [www.tonibuzzeo.com](http://www.tonibuzzeo.com) or e-mail Toni at tonibuzzeo@tonibuzzeo.com.
How did A Book and A Hug come to be?
I decided to create a website just for kids that would help them to find a book. I had been working in an independent children's bookstore (otherwise known as heaven) and had learned the power of knowing the books, getting to understand the kids, and then being able to match the book to the individual reading personalities. Family after family had dragged in an unwilling reader only to leave with a surprised reader, book in hand and a sense of anticipation—and dare I say excitement—that they had a book to read that they might actually connect with. CONNECTING with the book is the power here. When kids feel themselves reflected in a book, feel like the book somehow understands who they are, we all WIN.

I created abookandahug.com so kids everywhere, at any time of day, could find their own book. I am working with this amazing team of generous and dedicated librarians across the country to build a good collection of books and to give kids tools to navigate the book ocean.

Why do you do what you do?
The most important thing we can give a child is the gift of her best self. Today, with the media-generated culture coloring self worth and identity in terms of what you wear and what you own, kids can easily get confused and have a hard time finding the path to what gifts they possess, who they are as caring human beings, what they see as the reason they are on the Earth. That sounds pretty complex but really, every one of them is unique and brings wonderful abilities. We need to help them find their uniqueness and we need to help them celebrate it. It’s about their shoes or their purse or their new video game. It’s about their own wonder.

Books are powerful tools for doing both of those. I always tell my audiences that books are mirrors and pathways. As mirrors, books are little flashlights shining into the corners and nooks inside kids and they reveal for the parents, the teachers, and the kids themselves what they laugh at, what they cry at, whether they need the book to be thoughtful or action-packed. These are all clues to figuring out just who is deep down inside that young person. The books serve as pathways, too, because they ask questions of children like, what would it be like to be autistic, or to be the bully, or to live in Pakistan, or even to be a spy for MI-6. Walk a mile in those shoes for fifty pages and see if you connect with that feeling or that injustice; that adventure or that pure fun. What’s rewarding about it? It satisfies my deepest soul. I love this planet and the wonderful beings who inhabit it. I see the searching that goes on in kids and in families. Every child has that unique spark down inside. They’re all born with it. I know no greater joy that handing a child a book that makes that spark catch the light and start to glow. That child can just take off and fly with the knowledge that he or she is made of something wonderful, belongs in this world, has unique gifts and can enjoy the wonder of being him- or herself. And that we need them to make our world an even better place.

Books are little messages sailing into souls. They poke around and visit inside and shine light. They are amazing gifts, as Katherine Paterson would say, from the author's invisible self to the child’s invisible self. That’s what it’s all about. And I love to go out and speak about this to audiences so if anyone would like to invite me, I’d love to come and share the joy and the power of what we do together.

Do you need additional reviewers?
I would love to have more reviewers for abookandahug. If folks would like to review, they can email me at bookandahug@gmail.com and I’ll send them a template and a list of keywords.
Advice for New Reviewers
Current librarian-reviewers offer the following advice to librarians who would like to become reviewers of children’s books.

Linda Lucke, Butterfield Elementary School, Libertyville, IL
Read, read, and read some more. Then look for opportunities to do volunteer reviewing.

Cheryl Whitmore Stevens, Tolland High School, Tolland, CT
Read lots of books, but also read lots of reviews. It will help you determine which were helpful and which were not and how you would like your reviews to sound.

Katie Lawrence, St. Stanislaus Kostka and Patrick Henry Elementary Schools, Chicago, IL
Get involved if you can! It is a great way to get connected to your career in a new way, plus you usually get free books that you can read before anyone else does. I would caution that you should make sure it is a time commitment you are really prepared to take on.

Kristy Dempsey, The American School of Belo Horizonte, Belo Horizonte, Minas Gerais, Brazil
Begin to review on your own! Create a blog and post book reviews, or post reviews via a Goodreads account. The practice of thinking about books critically will make you a better librarian as you consider how your own students might respond to these books.

Sadie Longood, Dallas High School, Dallas, OR
I suggest that librarians pay close attention to the reviews in trusted reviewing sources that they already use, such as School Library Journal or Booklist. Also, scour the many blogs devoted to book reviews. My own blog’s audience is my students, but if one were looking for a wider audience, my suggestion would be to create a niche by selecting one genre and explore it in depth.

Jackie Keith, Riverbend High School Library, Fredericksburg, VA
Read a lot in the genres you’d like to review. Practice writing reviews and compare them to published ones. Library Media Connection hasReviewer Guidelines to help at www.abc-clio.com/uploadedFiles/Content/promo/LMCReviewerGuidelines_082010.pdf.

Kelly M. Hoppe, Palo Duro High School Library, Amarillo, TX
1. Make sure you have the time to commit to it.
2. Make sure you can be fair when evaluating books that you may not prefer.
3. Apply!

Debbie Wenk, Rachel Carson Middle School, Herndon, VA
Read everything you can get your hands on and talk to your students about the books. Find out what they liked or didn’t like. Read award-winning or honor books to get a feel for what excellence in literature is like (even though we know that every award committee is different and in the end, their opinion is just that—an opinion.) Finally, contact the review editor of the journals to see if they are interested in taking on more reviewers.
Betsy Ruffin (retired), Cleburne ISD Elementary Schools, Cleburne, TX

Check with publishers at conventions or online to see who is looking for reviewers.

Marcia Kochel, The Galloway School, Atlanta, GA

Just do it. Many review sources are looking for reviewers—you just have to write some samples to apply for the job. Alternately, start your own blog and do your own thing.

Kristine Wildner, Fr. Edward Wieland Library, Holy Apostles School, New Berlin, WI

Start by writing about a new book that you absolutely love! Submit it to an online vendor—like Amazon or Barnes and Noble. Then you will have something to send to editors. If they like your work, you will be set with a new hobby!

Blake Norby, Chapel Hill High School, Chapel Hill, NC

Find a magazine that publishes reviews that you personally already love, like I did with VOYA. Look into the qualifications and see if you fit them, and then just go for it!

Genevieve Gallagher, Charlottesville High School, Charlottesville, VA

Try your best to be objective, but don’t sugar-coat it and don’t waste the readers’ time. Ask the publications that you rely on most if they are looking for reviewers and be prepared to send a sample of your work in the format that they use. (If they want reviews to be a certain length, show them that you can write a review of that length.)

Grace Oliff, Ann Blanche Smith School Library, Hillsdale, NJ

Take it seriously, and don’t be flip or cute when writing a review. Even dismal books are someone’s prized creation, and an author’s feelings should be taken into account. It is possible to write a negative review that gives librarians the information they need to make an informed decision with their precious dollars without being mean-spirited.

Terri L. Street, Longfellow Middle School, Norman, OK

I teach children’s literature in the School of Library and Information Studies at the University of Oklahoma as an adjunct and always include writing reviews in the syllabus. I urge my students to follow this course of action to become a reliable reviewer:

1. First, become a voracious reader of reviews from a variety of sources. Writers must first be readers!

2. Read the reviews carefully, noticing the things that you find most helpful in the reviews.

3. Use sticky notes to mark strong and weak points in a book that is being read for a review. Don’t rely on your memory alone!

4. Write the review, including elements identified earlier as most helpful and excluding the resolution. No spoilers, please!

5. Careful proofreading and editing is a must. No one trusts a review that is riddled with errors!

6. Submit edited reviews to the local library, newspaper, or school for inclusion in newsletters.
7. Post reviews on a personal blog or public review site such as www.wordpress.com or www.goodreads.com.
8. Contact periodicals or other professional reviewing sources for directions on submitting reviews for publication or becoming a reviewer. Follow their directions explicitly. Different sources require different formats.

MaryAnn Karre, Horace Mann and Thomas Jefferson Elementary Schools, Binghamton, New York

1. Read reviews in a number of sources.
2. Watch the professional journals for opportunities.
3. Read even when you are not reviewing.
4. Keep track of deadlines.
5. Remember your audience and why they read reviews.

Roxanne Mills, Old Dominion University, Norfolk, VA

Be sure you are honest with yourself about your time commitment. It does take time to read and to be a careful reviewer.