

# It's the Story, Stupid: The Consumer Reviews Most Likely to Influence Purchasing Decisions

Tom van Laer

**If you want to persuade, start with a bang** ✕ Helpful reviews are like good movies or a good novel: If you're hooked right away, you stay and remember. No matter how short, a review tells a story in much the same way as a novel. If you want to persuade, it should start with something dramatic and sensational or the key takeaway, rather than saving the best elements for the end. This is just one of the findings of research by my colleagues and me into what gives consumer reviews their power to influence consumer choices. Whether consumers are booking a hotel room, choosing a restaurant, deciding on what movie to see, or buying any number of things, it is likely they have read online reviews before making their decision. In view of the influence reviews have, there is considerable interest in knowing the qualities that make them compelling and persuasive. What is it that makes a consumer review persuasive, though?

**Helpful reviews show who did what, where, when, and why** ✕ In fact, the same elements that hook the reader of a novel also exist in reviews. A story – no matter how short it is – has the power to draw you in and grab your attention if it uses certain narrative elements. We conducted three studies to determine these elements. In the first project, we tested the helpfulness of consumers' reviews on Tripadvisor according to a helpfulness rating provided by consumers on

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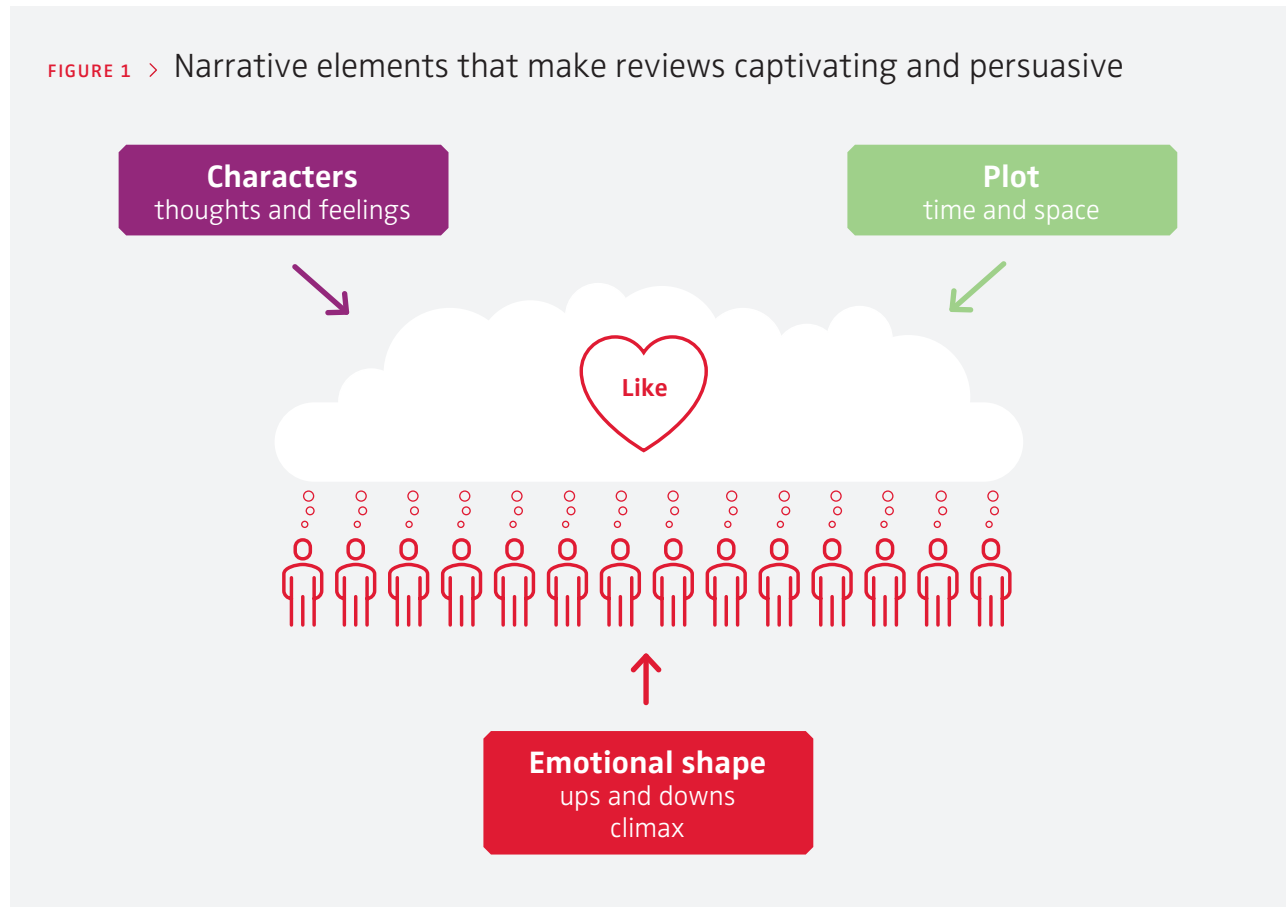




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FIGURE 1 > Narrative elements that make reviews captivating and persuasive



the platform (see Box 1). In the second study, panelists on Amazon Mechanical Turk, a crowdsourcing platform, rated how engaging and helpful they perceived a selection of reviews to be. In the third study, 156 students read reviews about a trip to Agra, India and evaluated them along the same criteria as in Study 2. In addition, they indicated how much they wanted to travel to Agra after reading the reviews. All studies showed that the more narrative elements (see Figure 1) that were present, the more the reviews were regarded as captivating and persuasive. The most persuasive reviews tell who did what, where, when, and why, and provide emotional transitions and climaxes at the beginning.

**Why writing and recognizing helpful reviews is important** ✕ Online reviews differ from offline reviews in scale, scope, and distribution of expertise. Today, more opinions and user-generated content are available to consumers than ever before. Not only the scale, but also the scope of reviews is enormous: Opinions are no longer restricted to a subset of products or services for sale. Instead, consumers can now even find reviews about the least commercial experiences,

such as a visit to the Grand Mosque in Mecca, Saudi Arabia. Reviews are also no longer restricted to a handful of elite reviewers. Instead, anyone can write about any purchase, distributing and democratizing expertise. This means that any consumer with an Internet connection and an opinion can claim to be an expert. The advantage is that consumers thus have access to a multitude of perspectives instead of only those of a professional cadre. On the other hand, the quality of many reviews can be questioned, and the ability to access more information about a wider-than-ever-before range of purchases can result in information overload. In addition, there is, of course, the big issue of fake reviews, which means that consumers are vulnerable to deceit. Tripadvisor revealed in a report that more than 1 million fake reviews were removed from the platform in 2018 alone. Obviously, there is a role for digital curation by managers and reviewers. Consumers are always more likely to buy something when the review tells a captivating story – there is no need to lie about it. This is what social media influencers, professional reviewers, software developers, event managers, advertisers, and social network managers can do to raise review quality.

## BOX 1

## Things to Do in Las Vegas: Researching the impact of travel-related reviews on Tripadvisor



In this study, we analyzed almost 200,000 reviews from the “Things to Do in Las Vegas” category on Tripadvisor. Our computerized technique showed the relationship between combinations of words used and the helpfulness of reviews, as measured by reader ratings. We also used an algorithm to tally how many positive and negative words each review contained and where they featured. This analysis tested the effect of the emotional thread in the stories. The following review characteristics increased the helpfulness of the reviews. A quote illustrates each characteristic.



### > Characters who have thoughts and feelings

The following extract from a review of “Kà”, a circus show in Las Vegas, offers insight into the writer’s state of mind.

*“There was a lot of action. That I love in this show. I would totally go see it again”.*



### > Events that happen in a particular place and at a particular time

Such events convey a sense of place and a sequence of events, as in this review of the musical “Vegas! The Show”.

*“The first half seemed to drag on until the bird trainer and his buddies came on. Because they were hilarious, and their performance seemed to add life to the show and energize the crowd. The second half of the show was a lot of fun!”*



### > Emotional curves instead of linear narratives

Reviews that exhibit emotional curves in their story line and take readers on an emotional journey with ups and downs were rated as more helpful than those that provided a linear narrative. An example is the following review of “Mystery Adventures”, a live-action role-playing game organized in Las Vegas.

*“This is definitely an unusual thing to do in Las Vegas, but can be a wonderful change of pace. If you are into CSI and like solving mysteries, this is for you. If you'd rather just kick back, this might be a bit much. Max seemed nervous at first with lots of ‘uhhh’s’ and ‘ummmms’, but warmed up quickly. The mystery started out slow ... which might be natural, but picked up pace and excitement as the night went on. And it did go on ... from 7pm to well past 10pm. Very exciting and worth the effort we put into it”.*

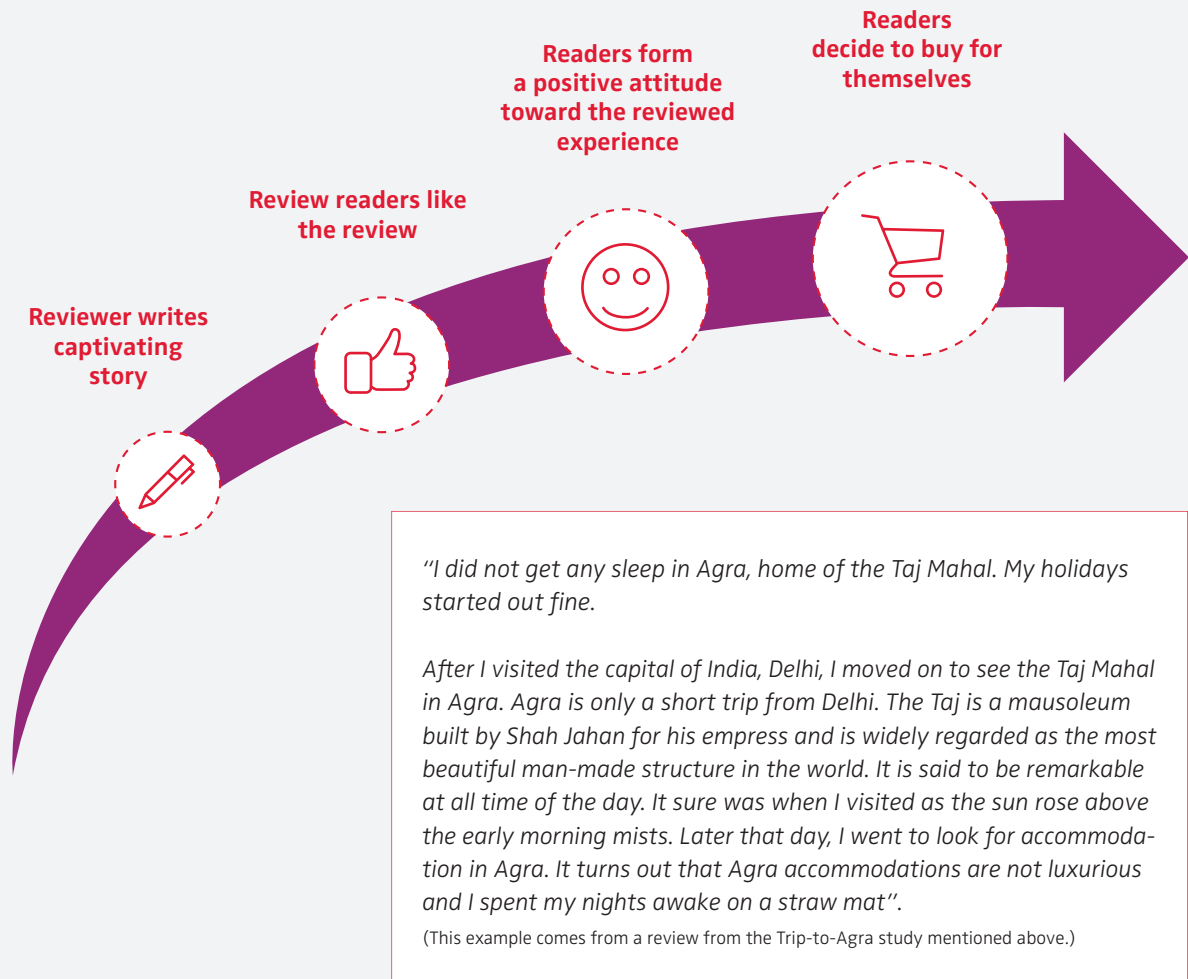


### > A climax or bang at the beginning

Reviews starting with their takeaway, or most dramatic revelation, tended to be more helpful too. The following opening of a Graceland Wedding Chapel review is an example.

*“I was so upset, I did not get married at Graceland Chapel! On our wedding night, there we were, waiting for the limo. An hour after our wedding was to have started, still no driver. By then, our chapel reservation had expired!”*

FIGURE 2 > How a captivating story translates into purchase intentions



**How to ensure influential reviews (and that the right experiences persuade)** ✕ What story is being told as well as how it is being transferred affects consumers. To be successful in the rating economy, people need to acquire new skills.

> **Build awareness for narrative differences** ✕ First, marketers and consumers need to be aware of the influence of narrative elements to make more conscious choices. In other words, both consumers and marketers need to figure out how to make sense of online reviews: They need to read critically, learn how to reconcile differing sets of opinions or perspectives, and understand the roles that good stories play for the discourse around consumption experiences.

> **Read critically** ✕ Reading critically is a practice marketers and consumers should all adopt, no matter the publication. Narrative qualities are among the hardest ones to fake – so looking out for them minimizes the chance that fake reviews sway opinions. When reading online reviews, marketers and consumers should consider what the reviewers' state of mind was, where and when their experience took place, how emotions flow across the review, and where the climax is. In that way, they consider who is writing the texts and what their helpfulness really is.

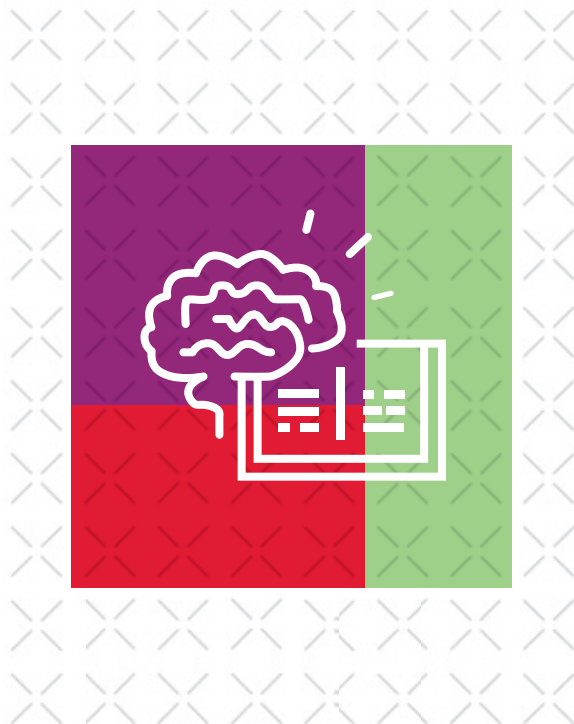
> **Invest in creative writing expertise across functions**

✕ Social media influencers and professional reviewers should now also know that they are better off investing in creative writing or storytelling courses than choosing to analyze experiences factually. Further, teaching software developers at all levels how to distinguish quality, useful reviews from less helpful or relevant ones can help. When they cultivate this skill, they can structure platforms in ways that make writing transporting, helpful, persuasive reviews as easy as possible and can develop algorithms that favor real and useful reviews. Consistent with these emerging issues of expertise and digital literacy, many event managers are experimenting with digital initiatives to connect with

consumers through these new media. Event managers of attractions, hotels, restaurants, tours, and other activities can structure their consumer experience as a developing story. Advertisers and social network managers may also wish to cultivate digital literacy skills as part of their mission. Our computerized technique can help predict which review will score highly on helpfulness and thus notify them of a review's future impact.

Altogether, the highlighted narrative elements can change the way reviews influence people. Media literacy can go a long way. Turning back to our research on Las Vegas experiences, we can all decide whether what happens in Vegas stays in Vegas, stays on Tripadvisor, or changes our next trips. ✕

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**ORIGINAL ARTICLE**

**van Laer, Tom; Edson Escalas, J.; Ludwig, S.; & van den Hende, E. A. (2019):** "What Happens in Vegas Stays on Tripadvisor? A Theory and Technique to Understand Narrativity in Consumer Reviews", *Journal of Consumer Research*, Vol. 46 (2), 267–85.

**FURTHER READING**

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