

Evaluating Apps

Abstract

Chapter 2 of *Library Technology Reports* (vol. 50, no. 8), “*Selecting and Evaluating the Best Mobile Apps for Library Services*,” discusses what you need to know in order to evaluate and write reviews of apps, including reasons why we need high-quality app reviews, a checklist of criteria that are specific to apps, and ideas for where to contribute reviews of mobile apps.

Why App Reviews Are Needed

The number of mobile apps available keeps increasing, and the app stores themselves are not known for making it easy to find the best apps. Apple is doing some work to improve this in future versions of the iTunes App Store, but there is still a strong need for quality reviews.

Often when you are deciding whether to purchase an app, you’ll see a number of reviews for it in the app store. Have you noticed how uninformed many of these reviews are? Anyone who has purchased an app can contribute reviews. Often people will dash off something without understanding what the app was meant to do. Other times they will use the review to send in their technical support questions. Sometimes developers even write bad reviews of their competitor’s apps, a practice that Apple is working to prevent.¹

It’s difficult not to be influenced by these reviews, but take them with a grain of salt. So many of them don’t have much thought put into them. Instead, it’s better to do a quick search for reviews of the app in trusted publications.

I’d like to encourage librarians to review apps—both in the app stores and in your own sources of professional reading, such as journals and blogs. The

quality of many existing reviews is low, and librarians are in a good position to evaluate apps for their communities.

Reviewing Mobile Apps: Checklist

There are established guidelines for writing reviews of books and other media, but I haven’t seen much written yet on reviewing mobile apps. That’s why I’ve created a checklist for this purpose.

In 2005, the ALA/RUSA CODES Materials Reviewing Committee released a very thorough document called *Elements for Basic Reviews: A Guide for Writers and Readers of Reviews of Works in All Mediums and Genres*.²

This is worth reading and covers many ideas that librarians who write reviews are familiar with. It covers everything from the specific elements to include for various genres and media types to the ethics of professional reviewing.

My own checklist can be seen as supplementary to that document. It focuses on what you need to include that is specific to mobile apps. Remember, it’s important to have basic knowledge of the capabilities of mobile devices (as described in the previous chapter) in order to write the most useful reviews.

Header of Review

- Your name and affiliation or expertise.
- App name: Check the app stores for official name, spelling, and capitalization.
- App version.
- Developer, with link to the developer’s webpage about the app.

- Links to app stores (optional—because the developers’ websites will have links to the app stores).
- Platforms (iOS, Android, other).
- If the platform is iOS, state whether the app is a universal app, iPad only, or whether there are separate versions for iPhone and iPad.
- Price: Is there a free version available? Are in-app purchases available?

Body of Review

- Basic functionality: What is it designed to do?
- Audience: Who is the app designed for? What age groups (if appropriate)? Who else might like to use it, and why?
- Simplicity and ease of use: Can you figure out how to use it quickly? Can you use it in short bursts between other tasks (a reality of mobile app usage)?
- Playfulness: Does it delight the user? Is it fun to use?
- Visual design: Is it visually appealing? Is the icon distinctive and eye-catching?
- Sound design: If sound is included, do the sounds help you use the app? Are they of good quality? Are they customizable?
- How does the app work for users with disabilities? Does it have features that help those with low vision, hearing impairments, or other disabilities? If not, does the operating system provide for this? Apple’s iOS is particularly good for accessibility features.³
- Examples: Give specific examples of how this app might be used.
- Related and similar apps: How does this app compare to other apps that do the same thing?

If appropriate, depending on the type of app, discuss the following:

- Does it work with bookmarking and cloud storage services (Instapaper, Pocket, Dropbox, iCloud, Google Drive)?
- Can you sync information in the app between different devices (smartphone, tablet, web version, desktop version)?
- Can you easily share information from it on social networks (Facebook, Twitter, Google +)?
- Can you export to a variety of formats (text, PDF, other)?
- Can you import from a variety of media types (text, videos, images, audio)?
- Can selected material be copied and pasted elsewhere?
- Does it keep a history? (Example: Wikipedia apps often contain a useful history of items you’ve searched for.)
- Does it have a wish list or favorites list so you can get back to your favorite items?

- Does it provide for collaboration?
- Does it allow you to do something you were unable to do before you got the app?
- Does it allow you to do something that can’t be done (or easily done) on a laptop or desktop computer? Specifically, how does it take advantage of the features of the mobile device, such as geolocation, camera, or accelerometer?
- Does it give you feedback on your performance (quizzes, points, levels)?
- Does it allow for personalization?
- Does it allow you to easily connect to information from outside the app (with an in-app browser or other feature)?

Be sure to spell and capitalize the following words correctly:

- iOS
- iPad
- iPhone
- iPod Touch (not iTouch)
- apps (not APPS—It’s not an acronym.)

Watch out for autocorrection that will capitalize the lowercase “i” when you don’t mean to. When referencing the name of the app, check the developer’s website or the app store for the correct capitalization. For example, the app called GoodReader has a capital R, but the app called Goodreads does not.⁴

Images

Since most apps are so visual, it can be useful to include screenshots in your review. If you do, choose a few shots that clearly show what the app does. Include a short caption defining what’s in the image.

Many developers offer “press kits,” which you can download from their site, that contain various images for using in publications with their permission. Most developers are happy to have their app reviewed since it can increase sales. Check with the source you are publishing your review in for guidance on permissions you might need or whether fair use covers the use of a few screenshots.

Example of a Well-Written App Review

For an example of a well-written review, see “Adobe Sketch and Line Master Drafting and Sketching on the iPad,” by Serenity Caldwell in *Macworld*.⁵ If you would like to apply the checklist above, read the review with the checklist at hand, checking off each item you can find in the review. No review needs to use every item on the list, but Caldwell’s review uses many of them effectively, especially with its discussion of the intended audience, what the app can do that

can't so easily be done on desktop computers, and how it compares to similar apps.

Where to Contribute Reviews

App Stores

For short reviews that will benefit many people, contribute your review directly to the app store where you purchased the app. This document from Apple gives instructions on how to submit your review: "iTunes Store: Writing a Review."⁶ For Android apps, look up your app on the Google Play store and click the Write a Review button. Your review will be connected to your Google+ profile, and you'll see reviews written by people in your Google+ circles first.

Professional Journals and Blogs

For more in-depth reviews, consider contributing them to the publications that you usually write for, such as library journals, journals and blogs on your topics of expertise, and mainstream publications, such as your town or university newspapers and newsletters.

Develop Your Own Collaborative App Review Website

Here's a good example of what librarians can do to offer app reviews to their community. Little eLit is a collaborative site where librarians come together to offer app reviews and other resources to those who work with young people.⁷ See its list of apps for story time, book apps, and apps for other library programs.⁸ It also provides a list of criteria for evaluating apps for kids.⁹

It would be great to see more collaborative sites like this one built for specific audiences or topics.

Finding Quality App Reviews

The following are some sites that do a good job of reviewing apps. There are many more, but these are a great starting point for finding examples of good app reviews and possibly for submitting your guest reviews. See the list of further resources in chapter 4 for more sites.

AppAdvice AppLists, <http://appadvice.com/applists>: Short guides for apps in very specific categories.

Android Apps Review, www.androidappsreview.com: Full reviews of Android apps in categories such as books, business, education, medical, music, and news.

Beautiful Pixels, <http://beautifulpixels.com>: In-depth reviews that focus on apps with excellent visual design.

Best Android App series from *The Guardian*, www.theguardian.com/technology/series/best-android-apps: Weekly roundups of the best Android apps in several categories.

MacStories app reviews, www.macstories.net/category/Reviews: In-depth reviews of iOS apps.

Macworld app reviews, www.macworld.com/category/ios-apps: Intelligent ratings and reviews of iOS apps in many categories.

School Library Journal app reviews, www.slj.com/category/reviews/apps: Reviews of best educational apps for kids in the "Touch and Go" section.

Finding High-Quality Apps

In addition to the review sites mentioned above, there are other sites you can follow regularly in your search for good apps.

For tips and best practices, download my free publication, "10 Tips for Finding the Best Apps," available when you subscribe to my e-mail newsletter *Mobile Apps News*, <http://nicolehennig.com/mobile-apps-news>. It comes out twice a month and will keep you current with new apps, updates to existing apps, and tips for using apps.

Notes

1. Todd Bernhard, "Apple News: Cleaning Up App Store Reviews," *iPhone Life*, June 16, 2014, www.iphonelife.com/blog/2458/apple-news-cleaning-reviews.
2. ALA/RUSA CODES Materials Reviewing Committee, *Elements for Basic Reviews: A Guide for Writers and Readers of Reviews of Works in All Mediums and Genres* (Chicago: American Library Association, April 2005), www.ala.org/rusa/sites/ala.org.rusa/files/content/resources/guidelines/ElementsforReviews.pdf.
3. iOS accessibility features: www.apple.com/accessibility/ios.
4. GoodReader: <http://itunes.apple.com/us/app/goodreader-4/id777310222?mt=8>; Goodreads: <http://itunes.apple.com/us/app/goodreads/id355833469?mt=8>.
5. Serenity Caldwell, "Adobe Sketch and Line Master Drafting and Sketching on the iPad," *Macworld*, June 18, 2014, www.macworld.com/article/2364252/adobe-sketch-and-line-master-drafting-and-sketching-on-the-ipad.html.
6. "iTunes Store: Writing a Review," Apple.com, accessed June 26, 2014, <http://support.apple.com/kb/ht3928>.
7. Little eLit: <http://littleeelit.com>.
8. "Apps Discussed on Little eLit," accessed June 26, 2014, <http://littleeelit.com/app-lists-reviews/apps-discussed-on-little-elit>.
9. Little eLit Apps and App Reviews: <http://littleeelit.com/app-lists-reviews>.