

### Editor's Introduction and Overview

If you read the editorials and surveys in *AMM*'s competitors (I do), you know that having timely and competent reviews is high -- maybe at the top -- on the list of things readers want in a model airplane magazine. You also know that getting competent, reliable reviewers is a continuing challenge. My vision and challenge for *AMM* is no different from our colleagues who publish other model airplane magazines: I want to provide top-quality reviews, and I need good people to help me do the work.

I have three main objectives for this guide:

- I want to set expectations for reviews among editors, readers, advertisers, and authors.
- I want to briefly describe the different kinds of reviews that appear in *AMM*.
- I want to provide guidance on how to write reviews.

Subsequent sections of this guide cover:

- Review Fundamentals: Two Objectives
- Competence, Discretion, and Integrity
- What do we review?
- Who does reviews and why?
- How do we go about it?
- Types of reviews in *AMM*
  - Kit Reviews
    - New Kit Announcements
    - In-the-box Reviews
    - Abbreviated or Partial-Build Reviews
    - Full Build Reviews
    - Comparative Reviews
  - Book Reviews
  - Decal Reviews
  - Parts Reviews
  - Miscellaneous Reviews

This top-level guidance on kit reviews should be used with the ***Kit Reviewers' Template***, and it's incomplete without it. The guidance on book, decal, parts, and miscellaneous reviews is short enough to be presented complete with their respective templates at the end of this guide.

All technical requirements for photos and data formats in the ***Feature Article Author's Guide*** and ***Digital Photography Guide*** apply to reviews. If you're writing reviews for pay, you also need to be familiar with the ***Letter Contract / Invoice***. To keep

this guide short, information found in those documents is not repeated here.

Bottom line: Writing good reviews is important, we want to do a good job, we need your help, and you could make a big contribution. If you're interested in being on the team, please contact the Review Coordinator or Managing Editor at [www.aerospacemodeler.com](http://www.aerospacemodeler.com).

### Kit Review Fundamentals: Two Objectives

***Our main objective in reviewing kits is to inform kit builders so that they can decide if a kit meets their modeling objectives.*** Kit reviews are especially valuable if you buy kits sight unseen on the web. Think of a kit review as a long, hard look into the box just before you go to the cash register.

To decide if a kit meets their objectives, most modelers just want straight answers to a few simple questions:

- What's in the box?
- How does the design (i.e., parts breakdown, features, etc.) and quality of moldings of this kit compare to others of the same subject in this scale?
- How hard is it to build this kit?
- If I apply reasonable skill and care during assembly and finishing, will the finished model look like the real airplane or spacecraft?

The first two questions can be answered objectively, if the reviewer knows what to look for and works at looking for it and writing it down. The last two questions, however, are entirely subjective, and that causes two kinds of problems if the reviewer loses his balance or fails to address them:

- Reviews that don't address objective accuracy or construction issues won't be very helpful to a builder who needs concrete answers to create a more accurate replica.
- On the other hand, "rivet counters" and "kit rippers" have a knack for spoiling things for modelers who are grateful for what they have and just want to build the kit.

We want reviewers to avoid subjective opinions whenever they can. To that end, we've refined and

expanded these subjective questions into more specific, objective observations and comparisons and compiled them into the **Kit Reviewer's Template**. This simple, comprehensive checklist makes it easy to understand what we're looking for, to gather the data you need, and to organize what you see into a concise report.

Download the **Kit Reviewers' Template** and use it as a checklist or notepad. We want as much of the information listed in the template as you can give us, even if we don't include all of it in the published review. Some items may not be necessary or are only appropriate if you actually built or partially built the model -- just answer the questions which are appropriate and relevant and skip the rest. Add sketches (just mark up the kit instructions) or photos as needed. You don't have to use the **Kit Reviewers' Template**, but you need to have a good reason if you do it some other way.

We distinguish between "feature articles" and "kit reviews." In addition to documenting the assembly and finishing process, features must showcase some useful assembly or finishing technique or interesting feature of the subject (e.g., conversion, special paint job, etc.) in the context of the project. Otherwise, it's a review.

**A secondary objective is to provide constructive feedback to kit designers so that they can take a bow or do better next time.**

Design is about making choices, and those choices usually have many conflicting constraints on them. For model airplane kit design, constraints include:

- Cost
- Parts breakdown to simplify cutting the molds and to make it possible to get the parts out of the molds
- Accuracy (and realism)
- "Buildability" (i.e., "What does the modeler think about how it all goes back together?")

Despite the vast improvement in kits today compared to 25 years ago, kit designers still do things that make building or finishing the model harder than it needs to be. For example:

- Adding too many parts in pursuit of more detail can make it unnecessarily difficult to reassemble the parts into an acceptable or competitive model. On the other hand, adding too much detail to a single part can complicate painting or compromise the shapes. For example, most experienced modelers would rather not have brake lines molded on gear legs or have nose wheels and tail wheels molded with their struts. There's a balance to be struck between these

two extremes. On the other hand, twin row radial engines should usually have separate front and back rows of cylinders.

- Good choices of media (e.g., injection molded, vac-formed, resin, photo-etch, decals, etc.) for the various parts in the kit can make significant differences in "buildability" (and realism).

The next-to-last item in that list of constraints, *accuracy*, gets short shrift sometimes, too. Accuracy is important to some people, while others are sick of hearing about it. The truth is that subscale modeling naturally creates inaccuracies, so we can't ever achieve a perfect model. To make matters worse, very few of us can actually verify accuracy of a model kit. Unless you personally go measure the original subject (and you know the history of the airframe and what it may have endured in the way of repairs, modifications, or other changes), you must rely on drawings that may also have errors in them. And to make matters worse, the older a subject is, the more likely that manufacturing standards and tolerances of that day varied from example to example. (Modern F-16s may be nearly identical, but anything built during or before WW2 could vary considerably in shape and detail.) We have to avoid being too adamant or belligerent about "accuracy."

It's safe to say that there are as many examples of errors in drawings as there are examples of errors in kits, but that's all we have and that's what we have to go on. We expect you to identify the best drawings that are readily available and to compare the kit to published drawings and dimensions. We've developed a short pamphlet on **Creating Your Own Scale Drawings** to check accuracy when writing reviews, and we expect you to use it. When the large shapes of corresponding parts on two models of the same subject from different manufacturers are significantly different, they can't all be right, and that means somebody probably got it wrong. Avoid rivet counting, but significant differences and errors in characteristic features need to be identified, even if we're just trying to get something that "looks about right."

### **Kit Review Fundamentals: Competence, Integrity, and Discretion**

If we expect our readers and kit makers to value our opinion, we have to exhibit competence, integrity, and discretion. Our approach must be positive and constructive. That's simply the price of admission in any civil society.

Competence and credibility are essential. You can't be an expert on everything, but you have to do your

homework or you'll come across as a hack. We want you to comment on buildability and accuracy, but we want you to be objective about it.

- Go to a museum or airfield. Look at the planes and take some pictures.
- Gather some reliable references and analyze the drawings. Make your own if you have to. Don't assume your drawings are automatically more accurate than the kit. Cite your references.
- Become a student of kit design.
- Build some models.

Use common sense and discretion.

- Appreciate the limits on time and money that can be invested in researching and tooling a mass produced kit. Be aware of the physical and material limits and constraints and compromises inherent in mass producing kits.
- Distinguish between *mistakes* and *compromises*, which are just mistakes made on purpose for some good reason (cost; capability of the tool, process, or materials; etc.).
- Distinguish between assembly problems due to limitations in your technique and those associated with kit design.
- Stay positive and constructive. Tell us how to overcome challenges, not complain about them. If you point out something's wrong, try to point out how to fix it.
- Avoid dictating a value position. You can say whether or not you'd buy or recommend a particular product. You can even say that a product is more or less suitable than another for a particular purpose or more or less suitable for one kind of modeler than another (e.g., for experienced modelers only, etc.). But don't jump to the conclusion that someone else should or shouldn't buy it. You don't and can't know their means or interests, so you can't presume to know their value position on the subject. The product you're reviewing may in fact be poorly designed or poorly engineered or poorly executed, but it may also be the only way to create a particular subject in that scale short of scratch-building it.
- Fixing some problems should be within the ability of just about any modeler. For example, if the prop tips are too square, round them off. Other errors, however, are generally beyond the capability of most modelers to fix or would take more time to fix than they care to invest (e.g., reshaping the belly of older *Spitfire* models to incorporate the gull wing shape at the belly / wing root junction, etc.). The difference between a "gross error" and "something you might let slide" is entirely up to individual sensibilities, so

don't dictate those sensibilities to others. It's offensive.

- Avoid giving offense. Avoid making unsupported or emotionally charged assertions. Don't be a blowhard.

Integrity matters.

- Don't take cheap, uncivil, or unrestrained pot shots at products or kits.
- Don't over-criticize and don't soft soap. Report what you actually see, not what you wish you could see. Focus on what a kit is and what you can do with it, not what it's not. Despairing and disparaging are just as bad as sugar-coating.
- Provide objective information and constructive, reasonable assessments and comparisons, then leave the decision whether or not to spend their money to the readers.
- If you have something negative to say, then say it, but show some gratitude and perspective. We owe it to our readers to tell it like it is, but simply passing on negative information is not our primary objective. It's usually not even useful.

Bottom line: Recall reviews that were useful to you, both as a consumer and as a builder. If you can figure out why and how they were useful and provide that information and confidence to others, you'll succeed as a reviewer.

We're not writing gratuitous product endorsements, and we're not the last line of defense protecting consumers from their own choices. Provide the information asked for in the templates as accurately and completely and professionally as you can, then trust me to make it readable and consistent with *AMM's* editorial policy. I won't be surprised -- and you shouldn't be surprised, either -- if I exercise my editorial prerogatives to ensure that we provide accurate, constructive, and reasonable assessments. We'll leave the decision whether or not to spend their money to the readers.

## What Do We Review?

New kits and modeling products are coming into the market faster than we can review them in the limited space we have in *AMM*. This is the golden age of modeling, and there's just too much good stuff out there for us to waste time or space on something that's not good or can't be made good with reasonable effort. If we find something seriously wrong, we'll tell the kit maker and let them fix it, rather than bashing their work in print. If you see it reviewed in *AMM*, we liked it and we recommend it.

We use several criteria to decide what actually makes it into the magazine:

- Just as we do for selecting feature articles: we focus on items that are useful and interesting to a primarily American audience. We're looking for a balance of American, Commonwealth, Russian, Japanese, Western European, and other national topics from all eras and a balanced selection of military aircraft, helicopters, civil aircraft, and real space topics. Don't be shy: if you're interested in it, we're probably interested in it, too.
- Almost any model is worth a review (especially by a competent builder who actually got it built), but "newer" models will usually get preference for space. "New" has several connotations. It can be "brand new," "like new" (i.e., re-released), or "new to us" (i.e., we just found out about it and wanted to tell you about it.). We occasionally review items that are not exactly new, but, for one reason or another, the community has shown renewed interest in it.
- We have no limitations or preferences on scale or price.
- AMM is a quarterly, and unless we have something useful to add, our readers don't need us to "scoop" monthly print magazines or the internet on what's coming from the big kit makers or what's wrong with a kit. (And the big kit makers don't need our help.) We'll cover the big-name kit makers, but we'll give preference for space to kits and manufacturers that might get overlooked in other venues.

Feel free to suggest topics.

Another way we decide what to review in print is to ask these questions:

- Would you build this kit again or would you recommend this kit to your best friend? What would you say in that recommendation?
- If not, why not, and could your concerns be addressed by the next guy who builds it, given what you found out and can tell him?

Many prospective reviewers worry too much about whether or not I like their model or how they built it. Don't. That's really not as big an issue as most people make it out to be. Obviously, skill in building is part of what it takes to write reviews, but the biggest issue from my perspective is whether or not you have something useful and encouraging to say (e.g., identifying and fixing problems, suggesting simple enhancements, etc.) to others about how to get the kit built.

Many prospective reviewers ask me what I want to see reviewed, and I'm happy to provide a list, but it's

just as easy to create your own list and suggest topics. If you're interested in something, other modelers will likely be interested in it, too. Typically, I find items by looking for new items in my monthly fliers from on-line hobby dealers (e.g., Squadron, etc.), surfing the modeling websites, and looking at new product announcements from the larger mail order houses (e.g., Meteor Productions, Hobby Link Japan, etc.). We receive review samples from around the world, but typically we buy our own. I can't think of a higher recommendation than that somebody spent their own money for something.

## Who Does Reviews and Why?

We only accept reviews from people we know and trust, and we expect them to follow the guidance provided here. If you're interested in being on the team, please contact the Managing Editor. Your inquiry will be more productive if you've read this guidance.

If you feel competent to do the building and assessing but need some experience, training, or help with the writing, we've got you covered. If you can scratch out the answers to the questions in the template, we can even generate the text for you. We'll also help with photography as we're able.

Providing valuable information takes work. AMM's readers want more than, "I've wanted one of these for a long time and it looks good to me." We don't expect you to be an expert or enthusiast on every topic, but you have to be credible: we can't come across as hacks. To be credible,<sup>1</sup> you need adequate knowledge of the subject (i.e., gather and study some relevant references) and some modeling skill (i.e., reviewing is not for novices), and you have to do the work (i.e., take the pictures, use your scale drawings, make the measurements and comparisons, answer the questions in the templates so you have something specific and objective to say, etc.). The best reviews are written by competent modelers who not only enjoy their craft but also enjoy doing the work and helping others.

Avoid these common misconceptions:

- Many people think that writing reviews is just a way to get free stuff. You might actually get some free stuff, but if that's the reason you want to be a reviewer, you won't do a very good job and you won't last very long. We don't get a lot of review samples, and the odds of getting

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<sup>1</sup> Another way to build credibility is to include photos or accurate drawings of the real aircraft or subject. If you have adequate photo or graphical support, we'll develop that into a 1- or 2-page photo essay to support the review.

something you want or exactly what you want are pretty low. We usually buy our own stuff.

- Some people think they want to write reviews for money. That's not a good reason, either. We do pay competent, reliable reviewers, but sometimes it barely covers the cost of kits and materials. It certainly won't cover the time required. If we have to train you or have to do a lot of work to get your review ready, we probably won't offer to pay for your first few reviews.
- While we appreciate that you may have written reviews elsewhere, we want to see the finished product before we buy. We generally don't solicit or commission work on speculation or pay advances for reviews.

## How Do We Go About It?

The process is simple and informal.

- First, we mutually identify an item to review. I could give you something from the stash, you could find something and buy it and make a proposal, or I could buy it for you.
- Second, get started. Gather and study your references. Take the pictures, use your drawings, and answer the questions in the templates.
- Third, get it done and send me what you have. If it needs work, I'll help you get it ready by asking some questions to fill in the gaps in the information and tidying up the text.
- If we can get the review ready for publication and if we're mutually agreed, we'll pay you for your work and materials as we send the review to layout.

I won't push a rope. We have production and layout deadlines for the magazine, but there are no deadlines on reviewers. I may contact you to see how things are going so we can plan upcoming issues, but we don't pressure reviewers. You either do the work because you want to, or you don't.

Likewise, we make no promises to publish. Someone else might get done ahead of you, or your work might not be satisfactory, or we might find that the product wasn't worth the effort in the first place or deserve to take space from more interesting or useful items.

## Types of Reviews in AMM

Reviews are grouped into regular sections in each issue. New kit announcements are usually near the front of each issue, and the others are usually near

the back. The order is usually dictated by lay-out and space considerations. Regular sections include:

- New Kit Announcements (including re-released or re-boxed kits)
- Kit Reviews
- Book Reviews
- Decal Reviews
- Parts Reviews (e.g., resin, photo etched, and cast metal parts; vac-formed canopies; conversions; etc.)
- Miscellaneous Reviews (e.g., paints, glues and adhesives, tools, figures, etc.)

## Kit Announcements and Reviews

We have new kit announcements and four types of reviews that vary by scope of information. Study the ***Kit Reviewer's Template!*** Starting with the smallest and simplest and working our way up to the largest and most complex, we have:

- ***New kit announcements.*** New kit announcements include a photo or two (e.g., bare parts on the trees, box art, decals, etc.) and some information on price, availability, and basic features. We usually try to include our first impressions, but the main purpose is simply to let people know that the kit exists.
- ***In-the-box kit reviews.*** In-the-box reviews go beyond simple new kit announcements. They may have more photos, more descriptions of parts and features, comparison to published drawings or other kits of the same subject in the same scale, etc., but they stop short of painting or gluing any parts together. New kit announcements and in-the-box reviews are usually written by the AMM staff.
- ***Abbreviated or partial kit build-ups.*** In many cases, you can get most of the information you need about a kit very quickly and without building it to the point that it's ready to be put in your display case. Abbreviated reviews get critical information out to people while it's still new and useful. Answer as many questions as you can in the ***Kit Reviewers' Template***, short of actually completing the model. Here are some suggestions:
  - Cut the large pieces off the trees, clean them up, and dry fit them.<sup>2</sup> Check for flash, sink marks, warps, panel lines lining up across seams, fit and gaps, how hard it is to clean up mold gates, etc.
  - Assemble and paint some critical subassemblies. That especially applies to cockpits and engines, etc., but it also could

<sup>2</sup> Masking tape, modeling clay, white glue, and Berna clamps are great for temporarily tacking parts in place.

include weapons or landing gear, etc. This should be an out-of-the-box effort.

- If there are extra decals, try some out. Apply paint and a gloss finish to a scrapped kit part (e.g., a moderately curved fuselage with some rivets or some raised or recessed panel lines, a wing with its control surface hinge lines, etc.) and apply the decals. Comment on different wetting and setting solutions or softening agents, especially if they don't help the decals lay down or if they melt the decals.
- If clear parts need to be polished out, tell us what you did and used to make them look better.
- List any readily available detail parts, conversions, decals, etc.
- Provide a short list of suggested references and alternative kits.
- Use a scanner (not a camera) to create images of the box art, photo etched parts, decals, instructions, etc. If the box cover is too large, try the end flap. At least capture the dramatic image and the company logo.
- **Complete kit build-up.** A complete build answers all the questions in the *Kit Reviewers' Template*. What's in the box? How good is the detail? How good is the fit? Where are the problems and how do I fix them? Where can I get more help?
  - Keep your work as close to out-of-the-box as possible. Make only those changes or additions that are absolutely necessary to complete the kit to a generally acceptable standard. Your review loses relevance if readers have to sort between what's in the kit and what you did to it or added to it.
  - Don't describe the build in exhaustive detail (that's what articles are for), but concisely describe any major fit or construction problems and how you dealt with them.
  - Use at least some of the kit decals.
- **Comparative reviews of multiple, similar kits.**<sup>3</sup> This involves complete builds and comprehensive, side-by-side reviews (using the *Kit Reviewers' Template*) of all (or most) of the available kits of a particular subject in a particular scale (e.g., all the 1/48 scale Ki-43 *Oscars*, all the 1/72 scale P-47 *Thunderbolts*, etc.). The objective is not to render an opinion about which one we think is "best," but to identify

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<sup>3</sup> These comparative reviews were inspired by the "Modelers' Sections" in the early issues of Bert Kinzey's *Detail & Scale* series. Some of those books have become dated, and some subjects were not covered for a variety of reasons. They were a great idea and a valuable contribution to the airplane modeling community, and we want to expand the scope and refine the execution of these reviews.

differences, discriminators, and options that let others decide which kit best fits their needs.

- **Feature Article.** If you really get excited and put significant additional effort into your review, consider writing a feature article and including the review information in the article. You know you're going past a review when:
  - You cut aftermarket parts off pour plugs or photo-etch frets, prep and paint and fit check them, and then install them.
  - You scratch-build parts or create a conversion or diorama.

We're walking some fine lines here, and we have to strike a balance.

- Your kit review loses some of its relevance and credibility if you don't completely build the kit, but it will really be irrelevant if you never get it finished.
- People want information (e.g., existence, accuracy, fit, etc.) about aftermarket parts that might be available for your subject, but stay as close to out-of-the-box as possible.

Use your best judgment and don't hesitate to ask for guidance when you need it.

## Book Reviews

Answer these two critical questions:

- Why is this book special in either content or value compared to other books on the topic?
- Why should I add it to my library?

Don't expect any single book to adequately cover complex airplanes or spacecraft.<sup>4</sup> As with kit reviews, discuss what a book is, rather than venting personal disappointment over what it's not.

To make things simple and keep things as objective as possible, here's a template to help you get started.

- Bibliographic data
  - Title (including series title and number in series)
  - Author(s) and any pertinent biographical information
  - Publisher and publication / copyright date
  - ISBN
  - MSRP
  - Availability information (especially ordering websites)
- Context
  - Is the book part of a series? How does it compare to others in the series? What are the general features of the series?

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<sup>4</sup> I can only think of a handful of modeling subjects for which I can say, "This one book has everything I need."

- Is this a reprint or an expanded or abridged version of an earlier work?
- Physical Description
  - Dimensions and page count
  - Hard or soft cover
  - Paper quality and weight
  - Font size and readability
  - Cover image (use a scanner)
- Assessment of photos and graphics
  - Photo count (B&W and color)
  - Photo quality / size / captions
  - Any fold-outs or pullouts? What size and format?
  - Line drawings, graphics, color chips
- Assessment of text and content
  - Organization
  - What are the author's critical points and objectives – did the book meet them?
  - Coverage of topic
  - Grammar and style (Is it a translation?)
  - Appendices
  - Tables and charts

## Decal Reviews

Reviewing decals is highly subjective. We want as much of the information as possible on this template:

- Decal maker, scale, stock number
- MSRP
- Decal and header card images (use a scanner)
- Number and description of subjects (aircraft types, nationality, units, pilots, time period)
- Kit specifications or recommendations
- Packaging
- Instructions and supporting artwork
- References and photos (i.e., Can accuracy be verified by photos?)
- Registration or multi-part design
- Color saturation (i.e., Are they opaque? Do the color layers bleed through? Are neutral base color underlays provided or needed?)
- Color accuracy
- Response to wetting and setting solutions, gloss finishes, etc.
- Clear film borders
- Screen resolution
- National insignia and stenciling included?
- Availability info

## Reviewing Detail Parts

Here's what we really want to know:

- What is it?
- Is it accurate?
- Does it fit? Which kit?

- How much trouble is it to use it?
- How much is it, and where can we get it?
- Does it improve over the kit parts?

Here's another template:

- Manufacturer, scale, stock number, and MSRP
- Media type(s)
- Specific aircraft type or component
- Close-up photos of parts and scan of cover art or header card. Use photos instead of words wherever possible.
- Kit specifications or recommendations
- Packaging
- Instructions and supporting artwork
- References and photos
- Parts layout, engineering, and design
- Removing parts from frets, backing sheets, or pour blocks
- Media (brittle or soft, strong or easily broken, smooth or rough, air bubbles, ease of sanding and cutting, etc.)
- Sharpness and definition of parts
- For canopies: are they thin and clear?
- For PE: is the relief adequate?
- Availability and ordering info

## Miscellaneous Reviews

To review other products (e.g., tools, paints, materials, etc.), just describe what you have and how you might use it. For example:

- Use tools in a variety of experiments or applications to demonstrate their utility. Include pictures where possible. It might also be important to tell how *not* to use it.
- When reviewing paints, spray and brush paint on both bare plastic and primer. Use a variety of appropriate thinners.
- Where appropriate, demonstrate materials with a variety of glues or fillers.
- Compare it to similar tools and products.
- Tell us where to get it and how much it costs.

***Bottom line: Writing good reviews is important, we want to do a good job, and you could make a big contribution. If you're interested in writing reviews for AMM, please contact the Managing Editor or Review Coordinator at [www.aerospacemodeler.com](http://www.aerospacemodeler.com).***