

PART I

How to Critique another author's work without leading to tears and bloodshed

Let's face it. We're all terrified of showing our souls by letting others see our work – especially in its early draft stages. So it's VITAL to learn to give critiques in a way that will both bolster the author's self-esteem, AND give them useful ideas to try out.

Remember: *The aim of critiquing is to make the author feel good and give them ideas to improve their story. They should emerge feeling hopeful and inspired. If they come away feeling depressed, you're doing it wrong.*

Every opinion is valuable and worthy of being listened to – as long as it's about the WORK, not a personal attack on the author.

Rule 1 – There will be NO personal attacks on the author, ever.

Step 1)

Understand the difference between 'Critique' and 'Criticism'. The first is unemotional assistance to see where potential plot holes or writing mistakes etc might be corrected. The second is usually just showing off your own insecurities by picking holes in someone else's work because it annoys you for some reason. It reveals more about the criticiser than it does the author's work.

If you feel the urge to criticise, don't give any feedback at all.

Step 2)

Read the work through once as a reader – relaxed and just soaking it in. Don't look for problems. Just read and enjoy. At the end, make note of at least half a dozen GOOD things about the story. Be specific.

Did you like the characters? Which ones? Why?

Did you love their snappy dialogue? Which bits?

Did you like the setting? Where. Why?

Did you like the author's particular turns of phrase – which ones?

Did you feel something profound – sadness, amusement, joy – where at in the story?

Did you like the basic idea for the story. What did it remind you of?

Did you like the twist if there was one? How was it different from what you were expecting?

What was new and unique and interesting about the story that you'd never read before? (If anything)

Step 3)

Read a second time. This time look for big-scale issues. Eg

Plot

- Did the events happen in a plausible, logical sequence/way?
- Were there any “why didn’t he just do xyz?” moments when an obvious solution to the problem wasn’t done?
- Were there any sections that seemed too slow, or were too rushed?
- Were there any scenes that could have been completely left out and not affected the main plot?
- Were there any missing scenes that were mentioned but should have been written in full?
- Were there any obvious plot holes or plot directions that the author could have taken to make the story stronger?
- Was the ending satisfying and well-enough foreshadowed?
- If there was a twist, did you guess it before the reveal? If so, what gave it away?

Characters

- Is the story written from the point of view of the most interesting/active character with the biggest conflict? If not, should it be, or does it still work?
- Does each main character have a believable character arc – change/learning/growth, whether positive or negative?
- Were there any characters that could have been left out or didn’t have much influence on the plot and could have been merged with another character?
- Are they likeable. (If you don’t like them are they meant to be, and you just don’t relate? Why? If they’re not meant to be likable, are they still interesting enough to make you want to keep reading)

Setting

- Is the worldbuilding thorough enough – can you really ‘feel/see/hear/taste/smell’ the world. Does it feel real?
- Or did they give too much detail and you got bored?
- Does the setting influence the plot, or could it literally be set anywhere and it would make no difference to the events?

Step 4)

Read a third time. This time looking for smaller-scale issues. Eg:

Plot

- Are there any scenes that are paced incorrectly (eg: action scenes with long sentences and too much detail. Or emotional/thoughtful scenes that are too distant and quick?)
- Any scenes that don’t have enough ‘happening’ to move the plot/s or character arcs forward – could they be merged with another scene for greater impact?

- Are there any “infodump” sections that could be trickle-fed instead (or removed)?

Characters

- Are they behaving/speaking consistently through the story. Are any changes in behaviour for a logical reason?
- Are they reacting to other people in realistic ways.
- Does each character have a distinctive ‘feel/voice’ eg: a unique style of speaking, moving, reacting, thinking, focus on the world?
- Are there any ‘headhopping’ moments or out-of-POV moments?

Dialogue

- Does the dialogue sound real when read aloud? Or is it stilted and over-formal, or just weird in some way?
- Were you ever confused about which character spoke? (ie: were they all speaking in the same way? Or did it go too long without dialogue tags?)
- Were there any “As you know, Fred” info dump moments?

Prose

- Were there any stand-out sentences that were jarring because they were phrased oddly or didn’t make sense
- NOTE: please do not criticise people as writing ‘purple prose’. You can suggest a sentence stands out because it’s quite different to the rest of the writing, but don’t tell people their lyrical descriptions they’ve put love into are “wrong”.
- Were there any words that cropped up so often it became noticeable?
- Were there any clichés.
- Was the author using too much Tell and not enough Show (note: there are still times when Tell is appropriate and useful)?
- Were there past/present tense issues or other jarring and repeated grammar issues?

(NOTE: you won’t have time to do an in-depth analysis of their writing style/sentence structures. So just note things that happened frequently or really stood out)

Step 5) Note down all of these things, if you have time – just dot points, not in depth.

When presenting your critique, keep it BRIEF (2 minutes MAX) and use the old Sandwich formula.

A) 1-3 GOOD things you liked

B) The big/important things that needed work.

- NOTE: Try to phrase most of them as a question.
 - Eg: not: The character of John felt flat. You need to do xyz to make him more real.
 - But: The character of John didn’t seem to have a growth arc. Was that intentional? If not, maybe you could try having him learn xyz?

- NOTE: Try to avoid sweeping generalisations eg: “you always” or “You never”.
Instead, try to give specific examples.

If you have a viable solution to things like major plot holes or character arc issues, then tell them. The author might not have even thought of that idea.

1-3 GOOD things you liked.

Give the author a printed version of your more detailed critique for later perusal.

PART II

How to receive a critique without feeling like you're hopeless or getting into arguments

It's equally important to learn how to receive critiquing without melting down in to a puddle of depression or getting defensive and arguing.

Remember: *The aim of having a story critiqued is to find ways it can be improved. Believe that your critique group only wants to help and is doing their best. But you don't have to take all of their advice.*

Rule 2 – There will be NO personal attacks on the critiquer, ever.

Step 1)

Edit the work to your best ability (unless it's a rough first draft and you're really only looking for feedback on major/structural issues)

Step 2)

Mentally prepare yourself by remembering the group is genuinely trying to help. No-one is perfect. Even award-winning authors need different perspectives to produce the best work possible. Your work isn't perfect and never will be. You need to be prepared to let people help you, even if you're scared. Your writing isn't 'you'.

Step 3)

Your job is to be quiet. Each member will have about 2 minutes to give you their ideas. **JUST LISTEN.** Take notes. If someone proposes a good idea, write it down immediately. If you have a question, write it down and ask later.

DO NOT TALK at this point otherwise you'll never hear from all the members and will miss out on important ideas.

Not talking also helps you get over the urge to defend yourself and your ideas. Remind yourself you're here to learn and improve.

If someone is getting personal, the chairperson will usually pull them up. If they don't and you genuinely feel they are attacking you as a person, then you can ask them politely to give their feedback later. That will be a signal to the member and the chairperson that a line has been overstepped.

Step 4)

After everyone's spoken their 2 minutes, you have a 3 minute Right of reply time. Thank everyone for their feedback (remember that they each took valuable time to try and help). If you want to answer any questions they proposed, now's the time. But it's also a great opportunity to say "What about if I did this? Would that fix the plot hole?" Because you can get immediate feedback.

Please try to avoid explaining how people misunderstood something. If they misunderstood, perhaps it means you need to be a bit clearer in your piece for future readers.

Final notes:

Not everyone writes the same genre as you, so they may not be aware of tropes or expectations. And their feedback may come from some unconscious bias for or against that genre. They may also be at a different stage in their writing journey and have more or less experience than you. Either way, their ideas are still useful.

You don't have to agree with everything that's said. But if you find 3 or more people saying the same thing, it might pay to consider it.

Consider several things before rejecting feedback.

These are probably not good reasons to reject feedback...

- a) You don't like the person who gave it.
- b) You love that scene/character/line and just don't want to remove it, even if it would strengthen the piece.
- c) You don't want to do the work it would take to rewrite significant parts.

Once you've done any significant rewrites, if you're still not sure, you can submit for a second round.

Congratulations, you survived.