

Becoming A Better Critic

Giving critique

- Never attack the person---always gear your comments to what is on the page.
- We are not trying to mold people to our writing styles. Figure out what the rules are of the piece your reading, explain how those rules affect you, and base your critique on how each sentence/paragraph page is reflected in those rules. If someone wants to write without e's, you may discuss the effect that has on you, but it won't help to suggest alternate word choices that have e's in them.
- Give people positive, constructive feedback in writing. Check marks and happy faces are all really useful—they tell people what caught your eye. Conversely, it is a delicate operation to excise huge chunks of text unless you know someone very well. If you do cross out stuff, explain why you made your choices.
- Be honest, but be constructive in your honesty. Try to word your critiques in clear, objective ways that your peers will be able to use. Think about how you best take criticism.
- Be specific. It doesn't help (very much) to say that you don't like it if you can't say why you don't like it. Similarly, it doesn't help (very much) to say something works if you can't explain why.
- Tell people what works for you and why as well as what doesn't work for you and why. Try to say what works for you first.
- Read carefully. Written comments are fantastic. The more time you spend reading the work, the better your comments will be, and your peers will be more inclined to spend time on your work. Some people don't work on their stories right away, and the written comments make it easier for them to go back to their work.
- Leave line edits and small things to the written critique, and save important/large scale issues for oral critique.
- Describe how the piece affects you and why.
- Tell the person if it a particular criticism is major or minor---that way they can gauge how important it is to them.
- Did I mention to be specific?
- Be sensitive to the critique environment and try not to take over. Make sure that everyone has an opportunity to speak.
- I prefer it when critiquers put their name on the work. Then, if I have a follow-up question (or, more often, I can't read their comments), I know who to ask.

Guidelines For Interpretations (Borrowed from Joanna Klink)

- What happens? Provide a reconstruction of the plot, being as precise as you can.
- Who is speaking? What do we know about the voice?
- Where is the speaker speaking from?
- What is the setting?
- What changes or transformations have occurred by the end of the piece?
- What is the central/secondary conflict?
- Is there predominant imagery? Is it “window dressing” or does it add a deeper meaning?

- Where does the piece become urgent, and what happens to language during these moments?
- What is the work doing that is most consistently itself.
- What are the formal qualities of the work (sentence structure, pattern)?

Submitting and listening to critique

- Be specific in asking what you want people to look at. That is, if you don't want people to line-edit and you're most concerned about tension, ask them to pay special attention to tension.
- Don't submit really rough work unless you have specific questions---if you do give rough work, then people will spend time fixing things that you will fix yourself. Remember that people have a limited amount of time, and you want them to spend time on the things that are most important to you.
- Try not to get defensive when being critiqued. I find that it is best not to speak at all during your critique unless you have to make a point of clarification. Remember that the more that you talk, the more unsure you seem, and the less information you receive from your peers.
- Don't apologize for your work or preface it. Your writing is at where it's at, and your peers are there to help you. You don't have to apologize for the weaknesses in your work.
- Read aloud or ask to have someone read aloud a short portion of your text. You'll hear things you wouldn't have otherwise caught. Option: the person whose work is being critiqued can read themselves or delegate reading to someone else (the delegated person can, of course, always refuse). You usually don't need to read more than a page.
- Novelists can run into special issues when submitting work. It is especially important that you ask people to focus on particular questions. Note that if people haven't read your work from page one, they may not be sensitive to more "macro" issues such as plot and character development, arc, and pacing.