

CRITIQUING 101

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The following document covers the basics of both giving and receiving critique for written narratives. Both are acquired skills that might take some getting used to before you feel comfortable with them.

RECEIVING CRITIQUE

When to ask for critique?

It's best not to ask for critique until you have a finished product, even if it's just an outline. It's hard to give meaningful feedback on something incomplete! Plus, feedback on an incomplete narrative can sometimes be more of a hindrance than a help, especially if you've never finished a draft before. Finishing a first draft or detailed outline should be your primary goal.

That doesn't mean you can't show anyone your work until you have a full draft. If you'd like to post a snippet and ask for a broad impression or just get some encouragement, that's completely fine.

But it's not easy for your readers nor is it that helpful for you to get full critique on something for which you don't have a beginning, middle, and end. Your reader needs to know where something is going before they can begin to judge it fairly!

How do I ask for critique?

Different stages of writing necessitate different types of critique. Make clear to your readers what stage you're currently at so they can give you the appropriate type of feedback. Tell them what you need!

Here are some examples of what is appropriate for each stage:

OUTLINE or FIRST DRAFT STAGE

- Thoughts on the premise, setting, and general flavor.
- Broad impressions of the characters and their arcs.
- How the plot comes across in terms of both interest and understandability.
- Comments on worldbuilding, if applicable.
- "Is this anything?" i.e. should work on this piece continue.

REVISING (2nd/3rd/4th draft, usually)

- Thoughts on the overall flow and pacing.
- General impressions and advice about the prose.
- Specific commentary about the character's personalities, dialog, actions, and arcs.
- Specific commentary about how the plot elements proceed and the ensuing payoff.
- Scene-by-scene advice on what feels necessary and what might be missing, out of order, or wasting space.

FINALIZING

- Line edits for grammar, punctuation, typos, etc.
- Adjusting chapter and paragraph breaks.
- Smoothing out prose inconsistencies.
- Catching continuity errors and contradictions.

Some writers will want to do what is called a “critique swap” where you trade works with each other and give feedback. This is great, just make sure you both have realistic expectations for how long this will take and have exchanged equal-ish amounts of material.

If you have critique swapped with someone and they don't finish your work, or they ghost you, you are under no obligation to finish theirs.

How do I receive critique?

You can ask your critiquers to give you feedback in whatever format works well for you. The most popular way is via Google Docs, because it allows readers to leave comments as they go and easily tie them to specific parts of the story.

If you want to use Google Docs, prepare each reader a separate version so their comments will not influence each other. When you hit the “Share” button in your doc, you can either keep the document restricted and add people to it manually via email, or you can change access to allow anyone with the link to view it. Set everyone except for yourself to “Commenter”. Also, click the gear to access the settings and make sure you uncheck the box that allows viewers and commenters to export your document. They shouldn't be doing that.

Some readers will prefer to download or print a copy so they can read it in whatever way is comfortable for them. They might still leave comments along the way, or they might save their thoughts until the end and present you with a write-up. Regardless, work with your readers to find a method that you're both happy with.

Good critiquers will leave both positive and 'needs work' comments. Not every critique will be super helpful, and some of it might be hard to hear, even if your reader has done their best to try and be constructive. You might feel bad about some of what they say, and that's ok. Remember, they're not talking about you. They're talking about the work.

If they are making negative personal comments towards you, especially if those comments aren't related to the work itself, it's time to stop interacting with them.

DOs

- Remember that all readers are individuals with personal preferences. One reader's word is not gospel. Ideally, have multiple critiques and look for patterns across their feedback.
- Look out for readers who give really good, balanced, detailed critique. These people are gold! They are showing you that they value you and your work, and are worth cultivating working relationships with.
- Give your readers ample time to complete the work. You can ask them for an estimate for how long it might take, but don't badger them.
- Thank everyone individually for their critique, even if it wasn't quite what you were looking for.

DON'Ts

- Don't argue with the critique that you get. Ask questions for clarification if necessary, but don't get caught up defending or explaining yourself. You don't need to. Critique is the reader's time to talk, not yours.
- Don't take critique about your work personally. You might not be able to help but feel a bit upset at certain comments, and that's ok. Let yourself feel what you need to feel, but don't take it out on your reader.
- Don't expect all readers to finish. Some may never even start. It sucks, but it happens. Accept it and try to plan around it by having multiple readers.
- Don't entertain critiquers that are all-negative-no-positive, make personal comments towards you, or otherwise can't give a minimum level of respect to you and your work.

What do I do with the critique I receive?

First of all, look for patterns! If multiple people are saying the same thing, it's probably true.

Look out for readers that really seem to "get it". The ones who, based on their critique and their interactions with you, seem experienced in your genre and have given constructive, detailed, and well-supported feedback. These are the folks whose opinions may deserve a little more weight.

And finally, don't discount anything, but take each piece of critique onboard with a grain of salt. Consider each thing and decide for yourself if it's right or not. Ask yourself, "Is this giving the impression that I want? Will this further the story I am trying to tell?" Remember what excites you about the story, and take on any and all advice that helps move you in that direction. Even if it's a lot of work.

This is why we don't argue with our readers. There's no need - the ball is in our court. We take in all their opinions whether we agree with them or not, and we decide for ourselves later whether or not it is relevant.

GIVING CRITIQUE

The most important and also most difficult part of giving critique is simply **be nice**. It sounds like it shouldn't be that hard, but it is, even if you mean well! Be careful with what you say and how you word things, especially over text, where it's easy for the recipient to interpret things more negatively than you may have meant.

Always focus your comments around the story, not the writer.

Never try to rewrite someone's story for them.

Your critique should be adapted for whichever stage of writing the story is currently at, along with any specifics for which the writer has asked you to look.

OUTLINES and FIRST DRAFTS

Tell them if what they've got sounds interesting! The premise, the setting, any elements of worldbuilding they might have mentioned. How do you understand the plot? What excites you about it? What about the characters? Talk in broad strokes about how the base elements of the story make you feel. Is it interesting? Do you feel a pull to complete it?

REVISIONS (2nd draft+)

Here's where you can get a bit more specific, but stay away from line-by-line analysis and nitpicks. Talk about the pacing and what you were thinking and feeling as the plot elements unfolded. How did you feel about the characters, and why did they make you feel that way? Comment on overall readability and style of the prose. Tell them which scenes feel strong and necessary vs. which ones felt out-of-place or boring. Point out any major plot holes if you noticed them.

FINALIZING

This is the nit-picky stage. Make suggestions about wording, paragraph and chapter breaks, and punctuation. Keep an eye out for continuity errors. Ask yourself “If I picked this up off the shelf at Barnes & Noble or Waterstones, would I think this was the work of a professional?” and do what you can to guide their work in that direction.

There are several ways to actually present your critique to someone. Many writers utilize Google Docs because it allows readers to leave comments as they go, tied to specific parts of the story. You can also give the writer a separate document with your thoughts. A post-mortem voice call is excellent too, just be sure you have notes. See what the writer prefers.

Regardless of format, here are some things to keep in mind.

DOs

- Word everything in as kind and constructive a manner as possible. You should be doing everything in your power to avoid a negative emotional response.
 - It’s helpful to talk about things in terms of how you personally think and feel about them, not as if they are objective facts.
 - *That character has a stupid name.* - Nope!
 - *I didn’t find that character’s name read well on the page, or rolled off the tongue easily.* - Better!

- Be specific. Try to tie most of what you say to specific elements of the work, or better yet, specific sections.
 - *Your writing was really confusing, especially during the action sequences.* - Not great!
 - *I had a hard time following what was happening in the action sequences. The characters did not seem grounded in the space, possibly due to a lack of interaction with their surroundings. See the marked section in chapter seven for an example.* - Better!

- Mention other works that their story brought to your mind! It might be helpful for them as a point of reference, or to use as a comp later if they’re querying agents.
 - *Your style really reminds me of classic sword-and-sorcery like Conan the Barbarian! Especially the way you describe the characters’ actions, it’s very vivid and heroic.* - This is good because the writer has a reference for how their work is coming across, and can decide if that’s the impression they’re trying to give or not.

- Talk about the positives. You should be making every effort to dedicate a significant portion of your critique to the things you thought worked well, whether those things are broad or specific.
 - You cannot rely on “no news is good news” when giving critique. If something worked, even if it seems obvious or baseline, you still should mention it.
 - *The plot was easy to understand and I had no trouble following along with what was happening.* - Maybe this seems like a ‘duh’ thing to say, but even basic things like this can be important for a writer to hear.
 - *I thought Character A worked really well and here’s why: Point A, point B, point C, point D.* - Tell them all about it!

DON'Ts

- Don’t rewrite sections of their story for them, even if they ask. It’s their story, not yours.
 - Exception - the writer has a repeat prose or grammar issue and you provide a corrected sample in order to help them understand the mistake.
 - *I noticed several run-on sentences and it seems like this might be a repeat issue for you. Here’s an example of one from page 55: (quote) You could fix it by doing this: (your suggestion)*
- Don’t keep reading and critiquing something that you absolutely hate! That isn’t fair to you, nor is it fair to the writer to get feedback that is overly tainted with frustration and boredom. There are some stories that simply won’t be for you. Politely back out if this is the case.
 - *Hey (writer)! I’ve realized that this story really isn’t for me, and I don’t think I can give much helpful feedback. I just don’t have the passion for it. Sorry about that, and I hope you find someone who can better help you.*
- Don’t ghost the writer. If you find you can’t finish the work, either because you hate it or because you’ve realized you don’t have the time or energy, you have to tell them.
- Don’t give feedback that is not appropriate for the story’s stage of writing. Line edits are not appropriate for first drafts. Major plot changes are not appropriate for final drafts. Use common sense.
 - Pretty much never give suggestions that would drastically change the story or add anything completely new. As much as possible, work with elements that are already present in the story, or at least adjacent to what’s in the story.
 - Exception - if the writer specifically asks you to do it.

- Don't forget to mention the positives! Even if they're basic or seem obvious!

And when you're done, be sure to thank the writer for sharing their story with you. It can be harrowing to open up your story to critique, especially for people who've never done it before. Make sure they know that you respect this.

Finally, if at any point in either the process of giving or receiving critique you start to feel *really* negative, frustrated, depressed, like you don't want to do any of this or talk to any of these people any more - **stop!**

Critique isn't easy, and you do have to cultivate a certain level of detachment to get the most out of either giving or receiving it. But we all have our limits. Take a break. Write something else. Read something else. Build up some energy and mental fortitude and come back later.

Happy critiquing!