

Workshop Critiques

A Brief Overview of Written Critiques

Writing workshops are beneficial for everyone involved; authors have the opportunity to gain insight on readers' responses, without trying to explain and/or defend the work. The author is to silently observe the class discussion until its end, which promotes patient listening and genuine consideration of readers' thoughts. The participants in the discussion are able to openly express thoughts and bounce ideas off of one another, all the while gaining ideas for their own writing.

During creative writing workshops, students are typically required to give both oral and written responses to their peers. These written responses—critiques—prepare you to contribute to the in-class discussions of your classmates' writing. In addition, there is not enough time in a workshop to discuss every aspect of a writer's piece, so giving your written critique to your classmate is an opportunity for him or her to get *more* feedback toward revision.

Audience

Your critique's primary audience is the writer of the piece you are critiquing. Secondary audiences may include your professor and other classmates.

Form

Most critiques take the form of a letter to the writer of the piece. Your job, as critic, is to engage with the writing and the writer in order to help the writer improve the draft. To that end, you should write complete sentences and in paragraph form, and you should take care to include references to the writer's text itself (quotations from the text, or pointing to specific pages/paragraphs) in order to help the writer to connect your comments to specific sections of the draft. Because you are writing to a fellow student—with the secondary audience of your instructor—you may make references to class discussions, terminology, textbooks/readings, or other students' writing and workshops because you share that context with your classmates.

Writing Process Tips

Treat every piece as a work in progress. No work is ever truly "finished"—there is *always* room for change/improvement. And keep in mind that being specific is key. It's easier for a writer to act on your critique if the writer understands exactly what part of the text you are critiquing, and what works/doesn't work about it.

Always start a critique with something positive. This is not only a kindness to the author, but also introduces you as a critic that the author can trust and take seriously. Good critiques can end up balled up and thrown into the trash if the author feels attacked in the first lines.

The purpose of a written critique is to share your interpretation of a written work and your suggestions for revision with the author. Critiques allow the author and discussion participants alike to consider the work from various perspectives.

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- Don't make vague statements like "it's good." Rather than simply stating what you think, explain why.
- Think in terms of whether something "works" rather than in terms of "good" or "bad." Focus on strengths first, but don't hide your constructive ideas about areas that could improve.
- Be sensitive but honest. The point is to help the writer consider ways to improve the work. Don't be afraid to politely express your true reactions to the piece.

Potential Focus Areas in Critiques

Purpose of the Writing

- In what ways does it achieve/fail to achieve its purpose?
- How could the piece improve overall?
- What aspects of the piece do you really like?
- How did the piece affect you? What sort of impact does it have, if any?

General Issues:

- **Title:** Does it do the work that it should?
- **Genre:** Does it fit the genre of writing?
- **Tone:** Does the language fit the genre, content, and purpose of the piece?
- **Initial stage:** Does the opening of the piece make you want to keep reading?
- **Setting:** Is the setting apparent? Are there details about the time/place/location? Does the setting play an important role?
- **Senses:** Are you captivated by the writing in terms of senses/ does the writing make you taste, feel, see, smell, and hear in your imagination?
- **Language:** Is the writing exciting? Strange? Too simple? Would you need a dictionary to understand what's happening?
- **Predictability:** Is the writing too predictable? Is it so unpredictable that it leaves too many loose ties at the end?
- **Distractions:** Is there anything in the writing that takes away from its depth?

Example: A particular word appears so often that it captures the reader's attention rather than the story line; or the diction is so formal that you can't get into the emotions of the characters.

Story-Related Issues:

- **Dialogue:** Does it blend well with the writing? Are the dialogue lines "normal" or too "forced"? Would you actually overhear people talking like that?
- **Characters:** Are they well-developed? Can you imagine them being actual people?
- **Scenes and Scene Transitions:** Can you tell when the scenes change? Can you keep track of the time/location throughout the story?
- **Pace:** Are there parts of the story that are "too slow" and could perhaps be more exciting or cut? Is there too much action and not enough "thinking time" in the piece?

Critique Example

Be sensitive but honest. The point is to help the writer consider ways to improve the work.

You may say something like "The dialogue in the opening scene is an effective idea—I feel like it captures interest right off the bat—but it starts to get confusing towards the end of the opening scene...I'm not making all the connections between the characters' lines...maybe the writer has those connections in his mind, but needs to give more direction to us readers so that we can make those same connections."

- **Believability:** Are aspects of the story just too impossible?
- **Conflict(s):** Is there an apparent issue in the story that is attended to and resolved?
- **Resolution:** Does it appropriately tie up the issue? Is it too far-fetched or cliched?

Prompts for Writing Consultations

- Does the critique describe specifically how the writing is effective?
- What does the critic identify as areas for improvement in the text?
- Is sufficient time spent describing why the areas needing improvement are problematic for readers?
- Does the critic offer specific suggestions for the writing?
- Where might the critique be revised to more clearly describe areas needing improvement?
- Does the critic make direct references to the text (either quoting sections or pointing to page/paragraph numbers) in order to direct the writer to particular problems or successes?
- Throughout the critique, does the writer remain respectful? Where might the writing need to be revised to strike a balance between “honest” and “supportive”?