

How to Give and Receive Critiques

by Dawn Copeman

As some point we all need feedback on our writing. This is especially true in fiction where we want to know if the story works before we send it out into the big, bad world. But critiquing is a two-way process. Many sites insist on people reviewing others' work before they are allowed to post work of their own to be critiqued. Therefore, to get the most out of the process, we need to learn how to both give and take critiques.

Be Positive...

"always find three things to praise...before you move on to criticism."

This is a good starting point for any type of critique... So the first thing I would say is try to come up with something positive to say about the piece you are reviewing.

When I say positive, I don't mean such non-comments as: "I like it!" or "This is good." These sentences, whilst good for the ego don't help the writer in any way. What you should do instead is write comments such as: "The characterizations were fantastic. These were people I could genuinely believe in." or "The dialogue was realistic and felt right for the characters." "I really cared about what happened to these people and wanted to read more." "The settings were beautifully crafted. I could see the landscape in my mind's eye." **Giving critique isn't all about the things that are wrong with a piece of writing, they are also about finding and praising what is good. Knowing what they have done well will also help a writer to develop.**

Be Honest

The second point I would make is that if this is not your usual genre, then say so. It helps the writer to understand where the reviewer is coming from. Even if flash fiction or sci-fi is not your area, you can still read it and give feedback. Your comments and thoughts are just as valuable as an avid reader of that genre. Who knows you might even discover you like that genre.

Don't say that the work is perfect if it isn't. This kind of non-critique is of no use whatsoever. People put their work up for feedback and critiques in order to improve their writing...

Think About the Person Receiving the Critique...

For a start, think about removing any sentences that begin with "you." This is the opposite of copy-writing, where the world revolves around "you." Think about it: if you write all your sentences with "you" it's very easy for the writer to feel they personally are under attack or are being criticized *instead of their work*. Try and start sentences with words such as "I" or "The".

Examples: "You didn't set the scene very well." should be "I found the scene setting confusing: are we still in the city or the country?" This makes it easier for the writer to see things from the

reader's point of view. "You made lots of typos." Should be "there were quite a few typos in the text" and then go onto to list the typos made.

What to Look For When Giving a Critique

Even if you read a piece and think you can't review it, think again. Here's a list of things you can and should look for when critiquing someone's work.

Plot

- How effective is the opening? Are you drawn in to the action or is it a slow, burner?
- Is there sufficient conflict? A story without conflict isn't a story at all.
- Are the conflicts resolved adequately? In a novel you can wait to the end of the story to resolve conflicts, in a short story you must tie up all the ends satisfactorily.
- Is the plot believable? This is subjective, but you can put down how it seemed to you. Do you think a scene is unnecessary? Then say why you think so. In short stories every word counts and we must all work to remove anything that could damage the tightness of the writing.
- Pace: did the story move with sufficient pace? Did you find it hard to read to the end or did you fairly race along?
- Settings: are they adequately described? Can you see them? Are they believable?
- Characters: do they seem real? Do they act real? Do you care about them?
- Dialogue: does it match the characters? Does it seem real? Is there enough of it? Too much?
- Point of View: is it consistent? Does it change? Can you tell who is speaking, acting or thinking at any given time?

Technical Stuff

- Grammar
- Spellings
- Format: correct use of paragraphs, easy to read font etc.
- Adverbs (over-use of)
- Exclamation Marks (ditto)
- Showing and Telling: is the balance correct? Too much show, not enough tell or vice-versa?
- Style conventions: nonfiction articles have different conventions to fiction. Such as how to reference information, represent quotes, and use acronyms.
- Correct use of dialogue tags, separate lines for each speaker etc.
- Structure: especially important in nonfiction. Do the paragraphs 'flow'? Are there any aspects of the text that make you as a reader stop to think about what is going on?

How to Critique

1. **Don't** think you have to cover all the above points. Look for ones that stand out for you and comment on them.
2. **Do** try and give feedback on what could be changed to improve the piece.
3. **Don't** say: "you should have written it like this:" We all have our own styles and we should respect that.
4. **Never** criticise the author, only give criticism of the work.

How to Receive a Critique

It is equally important to know how to react to a critique of your work. It is daunting submitting your work to others, but if we are to be published writers, then this is something we must do.

- **Do** take time to thank the person who has done the critique. Reading and providing feedback on works can take a long time. It is only polite to acknowledge this and thank the person for taking the time to do this for you.
- **Do** think carefully about the comments that have been made.
- **Don't** immediately fire back defensive messages. You might feel that the reviewer has got it all wrong, but wait before you act. Take time to re-read your work and consider the comments made about it. It is hard to see your work being criticized, but if you want to grow as a writer, you need to learn to take criticism and learn from it where you can.
- **Do** post clarifications if you think they are necessary and valid. E.g.: "Y's dialogue is deliberately misspelled because that is an indication of how they pronounce the words." Or "I was intending to hide the sex of the speaker by means of..."
- **Do** take the time to critique others' work too.

Critiquing isn't hard. It isn't an obscure science. It does, however, take time and practice. But now we know what we're supposed to be doing, we should all be able to give better, more useful feedback to each other.