



Giving and receiving criticism of written work

A writers' discussion group is not a platform for you to entertain others; nor are the others there to provide an audience. Giving and receiving criticism allows us to work towards the common goal of reaching our full potential as writers. You should not feel reluctant to criticise a fellow writer's work. Remember you are improving your own stock of wisdom if you can make a positive suggestion as to how a piece could be improved, and when someone points out a weakness in your own writing, you can learn from the advice. By sharing the experience in a group, we can all learn from each other's failures and successes.

It is relatively easy to offer encouragement and praise, but platitudes are a waste of time. And it would be unkind not to mention if you can't understand what the writer is trying to say, if you can perceive a mistake or omission, or if you think what has been written could be improved in some way. Writing can be a lonely task and we can all wander into a situation where we have looked at a piece for so long that we can't see even simple errors. A few basic principles go towards making the process of critiquing productive:

1. Never forget that the critique is directed at the writing, not the writer.
2. Start by saying what you do like. It helps if you can say why it *works* for you. And always try to end your comments on a positive note.
3. Bear in mind that a piece of writing *works* if it makes the reader respond in the way the writer intended. If the reader is unsure how to respond, or feels it necessary to respond in a negative way, then the writing could be improved. The objective is to find out why, and how it could be improved.
4. Try to make all comments from the point of view of the reader. Rather than say 'you have not made yourself clear', say 'I did not understand the point you are trying to make'.
5. Be honest about the way a piece of work affects you - don't say you like something if you don't.
6. Don't say you don't like something unless you can also say why. If you can explain why a piece is not working, then both you and the writer will learn from it.
7. Critiquing does not include censorship – but don't be shy of examining the artistic merit of material that may be considered of questionable taste. Although every writer should be free to use subject matter and language of their own choosing, it is valid to question the effects this may have on the readership. It can be difficult to 'strike the right balance' between realism and bad taste.
8. On receiving feedback, try to see any criticism from the reader's point of view. If a critic has missed the point of what you have written, or they can't see why one of your 'darlings' should be so lovable, it is probable that what you have written could be made clearer or more gripping. Be prepared to accept that what you perceive as a brilliant turn of phrase may not have the effect you were hoping for. Even an excellent piece of writing has potential for improvement.
9. Don't argue with comments made about your work. You may feel it relevant to explain something that your text has failed to make clear, but remember the criticism is based on the critic's honest interpretation of – or failure to understand – your intentions.
10. Always bear in mind that you are under no obligation to agree with your critics or to act on their recommendations – but you should always be grateful and thank them for their efforts and advice. Even if you choose to disregard the advice given, you will have gained confidence through knowing that what you have written is right for you.