1000 Words on The C-word

In the Arlington Writers Group (AWG), we've labeled every other weekly meeting since 2006 a "Critique Session." It's the underpinning of the group — of any writer's group I suppose. Giving fellow writers feedback on their writing to help them improve.

These Sessions Exist to

Help your fellow members improve their craft, and inspire/motivate everyone there

Not to

Show off, grandstand, lecture, bully, or hear yourself talk

I love the sessions, and I learn something every time. Whether it is preparing my comments on a work, receiving feedback on my own, or listening to interpretations that differ dramatically from my own.

But I am increasingly having a problem with using the word "critique." (That's "The C-word" I'm writing about here. What did you think?)

One of the tenets our group was founded on was to use every session to lift up and inspire writers. We encourage this by asking critiques to begin with positive comments. It sets a good tone. It puts the critiqued a bit more at ease.

And yet the word "critique" itself oozes negativity to me. Have you ever described someone as "just critical enough?" Or do you say a person tends to be "too critical?"

The definition of the word, and related words such as "critic," "critical," "criticize," and "criticism," all have at their root *"to find fault, or defects."* Or *"to censure or pass judgment (usually unfavorable) on something."*

In fact, we wouldn't have the phrase "constructive criticism" if the modifier wasn't badly needed.

Personally, I prefer the word, "feedback." It implies a conversation rather than a lecture from on high.

(I recently suggested to the AWG Leadership Team that we formally abandon the label "critique" in favor of "feedback" or something else. There was no enthusiasm for it. In fact, it was suggested changing the word would be sugar-coating the process; the artistic equivalent of a participation trophy. Is my Gen-X card going to be revoked?)

Every year, AWG reminds members what the goals and expectations are for our supportive community. Critique standards are included, and in March 2023 we spent extra time specifically diving into "The Subtle Art of Critique."

Feedback Should Be Focused

Fair Game	Offsides
– Language choice	– Not focused on the writing
– Story logic/world building	– Moral judgement of characters
– Structure/plot	– Author's POV or vision
– Mechanics (POV, dialogue tags, etc)	– Rewriting the piece

We drew lines in the sand.

Appropriate for comment: story logic, worldbuilding, plot, structure, and writing mechanics. Offsides: moral judgement of characters, the author's POV/vision, and comments not focused on the writing.

We had a lively discussion and I wanted to share some thoughts.

Judge Not…

Perhaps the squishiest one on the Offsides list is "moral judgement of characters."

It's a fine line between passing judgement on a character's choices and conveying to the author that the way a character is behaving didn't resonate for you. The former is a no-go, the latter could be helpful.

We illustrated the nuanced point by reminding folks of a novel excerpt we looked at a year or so ago. In the chapter, the female protagonist has an interaction with her love interest. The love interest is not a villain per se, but he does exhibit behavior that made many readers not trust or like him.

It was probably tempting to offer the comment, "your protagonist is an idiot if she can't see what a jerk this guy is." But that's a moral judgement of her behavior. Not helpful. Offsides.

The comment, "this guy is coming across as very shady and it makes me wonder what she sees in him, and question her judgement," is better aimed.

And in fact, the author confirmed that she had not intended to make the love interest unlikeable, so based on the feedback, she rewrote some of his sections to soften him and help make readers see what the protagonist saw in him.

Which, by the way, is not to say authors don't intentionally create characters with blind spots. That can tell readers quite a lot about a character. But that's where the nuance of the critique comes in.

Specificity is…well…Critical

It's unhelpful to say, "This doesn't work." It's equally useless to say simply, "This was good."

Two things are missing from both comments. First is the "I statement." All of this is 100 percent subjective. And also, a constructive critical statement has to include the "Why."
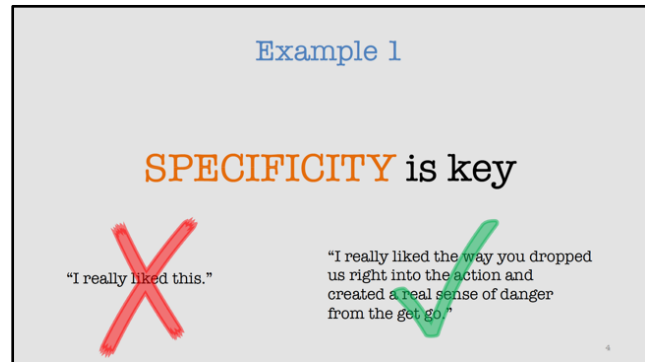
"This doesn't work for __me__…because you've shown us that this character is afraid of water and the party is on a boat. I didn't feel a strong enough motivation for her to get on that boat."

"This was good, especially how __I__ knew exactly who was talking even though you didn't use a lot of dialogue tags. The characters' voices are really distinct."

Specific. One a negative, one a positive, but both helpful to the writer.

And…Action!

The reason those comments are helpful is that they are actionable — another vital part of helpful critique.

In the first example, we're telling the author, "We know enough about this character that her behavior doesn't seem right." As the writer, you now have three choices: 1) Hide or soften the fear of water; 2) Increase the stakes or motivation to get the character on the boat or; 3) Ignore the comment because you disagree. All are valid responses — it's your story. (Remember, we're not commenting on the author's POV and vision for the work.)

The second example is very important because it tells the writer something they are doing that is working. It's crucial because

absent that feedback, the author may have thought, "I feel weird about one character always dropping his 'g's. I'm going to put them back in."

That might be the very thing giving that character his unique voice!

This is why, when I'm reading a piece for AWG, my first pass is usually to find all the things that are great. Jokes, voice, twists, turns of phrase, anything that makes me think, "Yes!" And that's generally what I write in the margins.

That notion of: "this is working, don't change it," is sometimes just what a writer needs to hear. Show me a writer with no self-doubt and I'll show you an empty seat.

This is why I believe it's time to dump "The C-Word" for "The F-Word."