

The Art of Critique

March, 2023

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

Helpful Critique Is Constructive

The Positive is Specific

- “I connected with the protagonist because...”
- “I enjoyed your world building, especially...”
- “I found the dialogue to be very crisp, for example...”

The Critical is Actionable

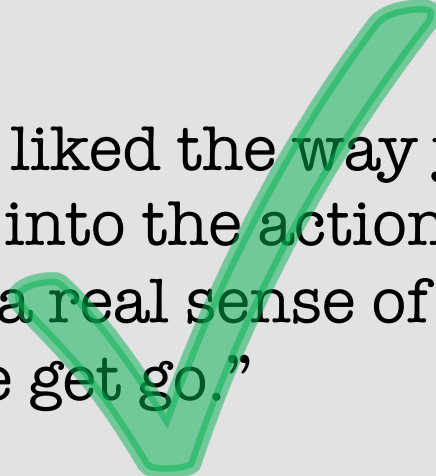
- “I was a bit confused by the way the protagonist reacted – it didn’t seem to fit with her personality as we’ve seen it so far.”
- “I thought the characters sounded similar. With so few dialogue tags, I wasn’t always certain who was talking.”

Example 1

SPECIFICITY is key



“I really liked this.”



“I really liked the way you dropped us right into the action and created a real sense of danger from the get go.”

Feedback Should Be Focused

Fair Game

- Language choice
- Story logic/world building
- Structure/plot
- Mechanics (POV, dialogue tags, etc)

Offsides

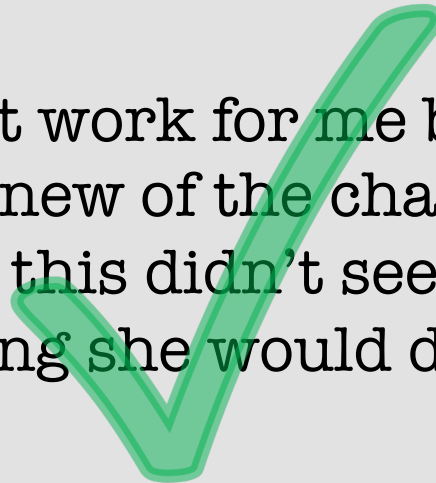
- Not focused on the writing
- Moral judgement of characters
- Author's POV or vision
- Rewriting the piece

Example 2

Again, **SPECIFICITY** is key



“X didn’t work.”



“X didn’t work for me because for what I knew of the character already, this didn’t seem like something she would do.”

Tips for the Critiquer

- Use “I” statements.
 - “I found this intriguing/unexpected/out of character”
- Be polite, supportive, and respectful
 - Not everyone’s skin is as thick as yours
- Critique the writing not the writer
 - Especially during personal essay, autobiographical
 - Also, discuss what is on the page – not what may or may not be elsewhere in the piece
- It should be actionable – or at least defined
 - “Maybe introduce the characters more slowly?”
- Use your written comments to communicate everything you want to the writer, verbal comments can focus on 1 or 2 big picture elements
- Be succinct

Tips for the Critiqued

- Prepare your draft – no sloppy submissions
- Consider sharing what you are looking for with discussion guiding questions at the end
- Don't take it personally and don't get defensive
- *Listen*. Don't hear. Listen! There's a difference – step back
- Take notes
- Make appropriate changes based on the feedback
- Follow up with particularly helpful feedback

The AWG Critique Contract

The Critiquers

- Offer constructive, actionable feedback to improve craft, not to rewrite to fit personal worldview
- Shouldn't feel compelled to share every comment verbally – use the written remarks
- Use the chat productively: with specificity and not to debate
- Are succinct
- Begin with positive notes

The Critiqued

- Keep an open mind
- Pay attention, take notes, stay quiet and out of the chat
- Resist the urge to “defend” your choices
- Make changes based on appropriate feedback

The Moderator

- Keeps the discussion moving and focused
- Keeps the discussion constructive and actionable by asking critiquers to expand on certain points or tabling well-worn topics
- Ensures the author's specific questions are answered

Keep in mind

“When people tell you there’s something wrong with a story, they’re almost always right. When they tell what it is that’s wrong and how it can be fixed, they’re almost always wrong.”

-Neil Gaiman



Example – Actionable and Taken

“Exactly,” she says as she stands up and walks to the door. The other man from the couch is up too, and has plucked her coat and hat from a rack. “Carol, get Hank up to speed on the situation down there. David, let’s go.”

And as quickly as Hank had been pulled into the room, the woman they work for, David, and the other man are gone and Hank is alone in the office with Carol.

“You okay?”

“I don’t know.”

“We’ll get a raincheck on dinner.”

He nods. *He had been looking forward to dinner.*

“I need some more data anyway.”

It was work, not romantic. He had been looking forward to the saltimboca. And to tackling

Moore, Colleen

Again, unclear who is speaking. I thought Carol was the only woman in the room. She says exactly and then says Carol, get Hank up to speed. ??

Moore, Colleen

Ahhh I see. There is another woman that was in the room. That was unclear. The other woman in the room, the woman he works for, needs a name.

“Unclear!!”

Example – Actionable and Taken

Klein 4

Access, Lobby Only.”

Hank thought about what to do, noted that he didn’t want roof access, but rather access to six, where he had just been. He also thought that all his adult life he had noted the decline in clarity and specificity of the signs of the world. Why should this one be any different? With that observation, he arrived at the conclusion that the only thing he could do was walk down the six flights to the lobby. Or seven to the garage and his car. He set off.

The only other times he had been in the stairwell that he could remember was during quarterly fire drills, and that was always a slow slog down with a herd of people joking about being burned alive, which they would be if that was how slowly they would actually descend.

Idiots.

Catherine Puma

This seems a bit off. Like, not really fitting this situation.

“This doesn’t feel consistent”

Example – Actionable but Not Taken

Hank half returned the gesture and was now committed to joining them, so he walked through the doors as a ding signaled an arriving elevator.

But Hank could not bring himself to join them so he kept walking past his colleagues and muttered an excuse about using the restroom before leaving. As soon as they were gone, he would return and get his own elevator. *A perfect plan,*

However, as he turned the corner towards the communal men's room on the floor, he heard the meeting leader say, "Oh, that's okay, we'll take the next one." *He hadn't banked on a crowded elevator.*

Earl Harris

I wanted to know why Hank couldn't share the elevator. He really jumps through hoops to avoid them.

"I want more
information about this"

Example – Not Actionable

“I’m afraid I only have a few basic phrases, but thank you.”

“How can I be of assistance, sir?” Mubiru asked the colonel while studying Ross who still held his hand.

In answer, Ross stepped sideways, tugging Mubiru’s hand so his back was **towards** the colonel.

“How many items are on the colonel’s desk, sergeant?” she asked.

“I’m sorry?”

Ross tightened her grip ever so slightly, “When you came in you looked at me, quickly



Towards with a 's' is British English.

“Write in a different style”

Questions, Comments, Observations