

But I Don't Know How to Critique!

By V. Anne Arden, ©2001

You're ready for some feedback on your writing. You're tired of the nice but unhelpful "Good story!" you hear from relatives and friends. You want to hear some real criticism from other writers. [...In college-level] peer-based groups, to get feedback on your work you need to give critiques to other writers in turn. It's not that you don't *want* to give critiques. You're perfectly willing to spend the time and effort. Yet you hesitate and mutter to yourself, "But I don't know *how* to critique."

Critiquing is something that it seems you're just supposed to be able to do. We spend lots of time on improving our writing. We talk about plot, characterization, setting a scene, and all of the nitty-gritty details that go into the skill of telling a good tale. But critiquing is a skill as well. It needs to be learned and developed. Your first impressions were correct: there is a *how* to critiquing. But don't despair. The skill of critiquing is improved in just the same way as the skill of writing: by doing it. If you've ever read for enjoyment -- and since you're a writer, you have -- then you already have the basic foundation on which to build your critiquing ability.

The Reader's Perspective

As a beginning writer you may feel you don't have anything to say about a piece because you're not versed in the skills of writing. How can you tell other people how to write when you're not so sure how to yourself? But there is important feedback for any writer that has nothing to do with the nitty-gritty of writing techniques. Instead, it has to do with the reader's reaction to the work.

After reading a piece for critique, stop and think. If you had just read this story in a magazine, or this chapter in a novel, what would be your reaction? Go beyond "Hmm, nice story," or "Ah, not very interesting." Why do you feel this way? Did the characters feel alive? Were you concerned about what would happen as you read? [...] Why?

The important thing is to go beyond the "Great story!" type of response. You don't need to know detailed writing techniques to comment on things like character, dialogue, setting, and plot. For characters, do you feel you know the people well enough that you can imagine meeting them? For dialogue, can you imagine real people saying those things? For setting, can you picture it? For plot, what is it? Telling someone what you thought the plot was can be important feedback, especially if the author meant it to be something else!

You are able to provide the writer with something he or she cannot get themselves: reaction to the piece by someone who *doesn't* have these characters running around in their head, and who *isn't* immersed in this world and knows so much more about it than ever would get to paper. The ultimate audience for any writer is the readers, and you can provide invaluable insight into a reader's reaction.

Going Further

As you develop your critiquing skill, you can go beyond the reader's perspective. If the setting was unclear, try to figure out why. Is not enough information about the surroundings given? Is a word used that was ambiguous and doesn't allow you to picture the scene? If a character seemed particularly immediate and alive, what details made this so? Be constructive. Suggest where more information about a scene might help and what type of information it might be. Is it important to know at the start of a scene if the characters are inside or outside, or can something like a tree be mentioned later? Did you assume the characters were on

earth, and they turned out to be on another planet (or in a fantasy world), and that threw you? Where was your initial feeling formed, and what kind of details would steer you toward the correct impression?

This is where critiquing helps your writing. As you learn to look for the *how* of another person's piece, you can apply it to your own work. If you read a story and think the characters seem flat or not real, and then determine it was because there was never any clear motivation given for their actions, you can look at your own writing and apply that same reasoning. You know why your characters did something. But did you tell the reader?

You can make a conscious effort to further develop your ability to critique. Read other people's critiques of a work you also critiqued. If you're in a live writing group, take notes when people are critiquing other pieces. Did they say anything you had not thought of? Go back to the original work and find what they commented on. Do you agree? If someone makes a constructive suggestion, can you think of a different suggestion that would work just as well? If someone commented on a detail you missed, look for similar things in other works. By improving your critiquing skill, you are honing your critical sense, and this will ultimately improve your own writing.

What If It's Great?

It is important to remember that critiquing is not necessarily about finding something "wrong" in a piece. If it's great, say so. This is something the author needs to hear. Why is it great? Go into detail. From the reader's perspective, mention how well developed the characters were, how you cared about the plot, what feelings the work evoked, etc. Then look for the *how*. What details really brought the characters alive? How was the plot laid out so well? What evoked those feelings?

If you don't tell the writer what you think is good, he or she may not know. If you think the first and last lines in a story make a wonderful frame, say so, or the writer may change it in a revision! In a critique, it is as important to say what works as what doesn't work. This both helps the author of the piece know what he or she is doing right and improves your own writing skills. By telling others that something is good, and analyzing what makes it good, you can learn to put the same type of technique in your own writing.

What If I Hate It?

On the other side, what if you read a piece and think it's just awful? First, remember that there is always good in any work. Second, remember to critique the work and not the person. It is important to adhere to basic critique etiquette. Never attack a writer or say something to the effect of, "You can't write." Putting a piece up for critique is making a statement that this person wants to improve his writing skills. You may think the piece is particularly bad, but that doesn't mean the person is a bad writer. As a critiquer, it is your job to let the author know what doesn't work, and suggest how to improve it. Depending on the type of writing group you are in, you may hate the piece because of its general form or genre. It's apocalyptic SF and you hate apocalyptic SF; it's epic fantasy and you hate epic fantasy; it's first person stream of consciousness and you hate that kind of story. If this is the case, be honest. Tell the writer that you are not a fan of this particular type of writing. Then do your best to get beyond that bias. Look at the story, knowing you dislike the general idea, and treat it like a normal critique. Consider the characters and the plot. How is the story crafted? Critique it from within the framework of the type of writing that it is. Don't tell someone writing horror that the story shouldn't be scary because you don't like scary stories. Find out why the story is scary, and suggest how it could be scarier. You can address the skills necessary to craft a good story in a form or

genre you don't like, even if you never enjoy reading such a tale.

If the form of the piece isn't the problem, and you just think the writing is poor, the message is the same: treat it like a normal critique. If the characters are flat, say so and suggest how to flesh them out. If the plot is uninteresting or nonexistent, suggest how to make it more interesting or the mention the type of information that needs to be given in order for the plot to be clear. Constructive criticism is the key. And in any piece there is something to praise. Find it. The basic idea may be wonderful but hasn't been developed, or the words may flow well but the story isn't interesting.

If you're going to be making constructive criticism, and you're afraid of hurting the author's feelings, there are some things you can do to alleviate the impact. Always be polite with your criticism. Don't say, "This story has no point." Say, "The plot of the story is not clear, because..." Try to find something in the work to illustrate what you mean for your positive suggestions. If you suggest more details about the characters, find a detail the writer does give, and say to give a greater quantity like that. Frame your critique with the good points. Start off with something you thought worked, go into the constructive criticism, and finish with another positive comment.

Whether you think the piece is good or bad, whether it's in your favorite genre or one you loathe, the same critiquing approach applies. We all have the ability to give a critique from a reader's perspective, and this is immensely useful to the author. Just like writing, critiquing is a skill that is improved by doing. And you can learn as much, perhaps more, from critiquing others' works as you do from feedback on your own writing. You have the base on which to build to your critiquing skills. The next step is clear: join that group or post that story.

Vision: A Resource for Writers

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