

A Writer's Edge

Give and Take Critiques

By Georganna Hancock

Skillful feedback can help develop a writer's productivity and style. It is usual to reciprocate by reading and reviewing others' work. A gentle give and take of opinions deepens the beginner's understanding and broadens a maturing writer's talents. The key word here is "gentle." A critique group is not the place to unleash vitriolic diatribes, to mount soapboxes and harp on favorite hobbyhorses, or in general to vent negative emotions.

Critique groups must feel like safe havens, especially for new writers who often have difficulty distinguishing their personalities from their writings. We all make the same mistakes when starting out, and no one reviewer needs to take on the entire burden of showing another writer the light. The beauty of a critique group is that the combined expressions of several members may have more influence than an analysis by any one of them.

Giving Literary Criticism

While honesty in giving a critique is necessary for improvement, brutality is not required. A critic doesn't have to cover the entire gamut of possibilities to provide useful insights about the effect of a piece of writing. Focus on how the work makes you feel, what you get out of it, where you were confused, lost or taken out of the writing and where any holes occur. Be specific and provide examples. Suggest alternative approaches to problem areas. Generalizations are useless to the writer. Comment on the writing, not the writer (avoid statements with the word "you" in them.)

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Begin your critique with a positive statement, and try to end with another. Yes, the old "sandwich" method works as well here as in the office or when parenting. Be encouraging. Even if you liked the whole work, mention spots for improvement, otherwise you are not helping the writer. When considering the mechanical aspects of the writing, try to avoid the proofreading approach.

Taking It

On the receiving end, practice seeing the comments as about your work, not as personal attacks. Sure, it stings, especially at first. With practice, you'll develop a thick skin and learn to separate your self from your writing. You can acknowledge the hurt without rolling around in it.

Moreover, you don't have to accept all or any of the critiques you receive as being the final word. Some people just get their jollies snapping at everyone and everything. Others may do it to feel superior by dragging someone else down, but their comments may hold hints for improving your writing.

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Nor must you act on any suggestion, but if you hear the same one several times, you should at least consider the possibility that something needs changing. When a critique shocks you or hurts your feelings, put it away for a while and then consider that it may hold useful information you can use once you've calmed down.

When you've absorbed the jabs, considered the source and carefully weighed the comments, it's time to let them go. Mentally tie your feelings to a helium balloon, and watch it soar away into the heavens. Then get busy putting the useful parts of the critiques you've received into action, revising the reviewed work or writing a new piece.

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