

How to Critique by Judy McCrosky

Judy Berlyne McCrosky was the founder of Saskatoon Romance Writers. She has served as President of the Saskatchewan Writers Guild, and as Representative for the Prairies and N.W.T. on the National Council of the Writers Union of Canada. She has long been an instructor of creative writing for University of Saskatchewan Extension programs. Judy's work has been published in numerous genres, including short fiction, romance, science fiction and fantasy.

As the writing group began its critique of my work, I sat in a big armchair, pen at the ready to write down the comments and suggestions. As one person after another spoke, though, I found myself pushing back in the chair, my body curling in on itself as a hard lump formed in my stomach. It grew as I unconsciously tried to make myself smaller, until finally something had to break, and I burst into tears.

Why, then, am I writing an article that tells you that critiquing can be one of the best ways to improve your writing? Because, when it is properly done, you will benefit both when your work is critiqued, and when you critique others' writing.

Critiquing is a learned skill and so is not always done properly. Unfortunately, because the word "critique" has the same root as "critical", many people focus their comments on what they see as weaknesses in the writing. This means the overall effect of the critique is destructive rather than constructive.

When it's constructive, everyone in the group will learn from a critique session, even if their work is not part of the session. This is because to be a constructive critiquer, you will find the parts of the story or poem or article that work well or need work, and you also need to figure out why that part is strong or weak. For example, if there is a scene in a short story where you found your mind wandering, you don't just tell the writer, "That scene is boring." Instead, you figure out why it is boring, and so your comments might include something like this: "There isn't enough tension in the scene, because neither of the characters is trying to accomplish a goal."

In this way, not only are you offering the writer a suggestion for how to improve the work, you are also sharpening your skills as a writer. Now, when revising your own story, you will make sure that there is tension that relates to the story's plot and focuses on goal and opposition.

You will also learn from others' comments, as the different members of the critique group will usually look for and focus on different aspects of the writing.

One other point – don't hand in a piece until you have taken it as far as you can. It will be a waste of both your and the critiquers' time if they point out things that you could have found on your own, plus it means their comments won't take you as far, or help you improve, as if they had seen a draft that was further along.

Overall, a good critique session will leave everyone feeling inspired and energized to go home and get to work on their writing. If anyone does cry, it will be tears of joy from the new insights.

How do you achieve this state of writing nirvana? Here are some guidelines, both for when you are critiquing and for when your work is being discussed.

When Giving Feedback

Some critique sessions are free-for-alls, when everyone speaks whenever they wish to. This can be useful, as long as everyone gets a chance to add their thoughts, but I recommend that instead you go around the circle and allow each person their time to speak. This way everyone, even those who are shy, will be assured of an opportunity to comment.

Sometimes people don't like the one-at-a-time rule because it prevents more discussion when comments made by one person spark a new thought in someone else's mind. A group can deal with this by having open discussion sessions at certain times. For example, a writer might bring in a brief outline for a new novel. She wants a sense of if the plot holds together instead of an analytic critique. Open discussions can work for this sort of thing. Or, you can allow interruptions to the person speaking during the one-at-a-time session, as long as the new speaker breaks in politely and keeps their comments brief. This way there is opportunity for new ideas while still making sure everyone has a chance to speak.

Some critique groups also impose a time limit for each speaker. This can be necessary if the critique group is large, if a large number of pieces have been submitted for that session, or if there is only a certain amount of time available. I used to think that limitations like this would hobble a critique session since people wouldn't be able to say everything they had thought about, but I learned otherwise when I attended a writing school in Seattle. During the six weeks, the twenty students were expected to write a new story each week, and critique at least nineteen stories that the other students handed in. The critique session took up all weekday mornings and we were also expected to shop and cook for ourselves. Needless to say, nobody wanted to spend any more time than necessary in the classroom for the critiquing. We set a limit of three minutes a person so that no one story would need more than one hour. Instead of tamping down our comments, this taught us to be sharper and more insightful in our comments. We would choose the three most important points we wanted to make, and provide our other comments in writing on the manuscript copy.

Three minutes is probably shorter than necessary for most writing groups, but if you think it would be helpful, give a time limit a try.

Take all ego out of the equation. It doesn't matter how good a writer you are or whether or not you are published. Everyone has individual skills, areas of knowledge, and outlook and so all critiquers are of value.

Also, the critique session is not the place to make yourself feel better about your writing by putting others' writing down. I apologize to the vast majority of you who would never do this, but unfortunately, it does happen in some critique sessions. Thinking back on that time I started crying during a critique, I realized months later that that was what had been happening. People rarely do this deliberately, but it can happen, either in the form of the comments made, or as a sneer in the voice.

Remember that in the critique group, everyone is an equal, with something to learn from and something to offer to everyone else. You are there to share and to help. Together, the individual members of a critique group create a whole that is stronger than the sum of the parts.

I recommend giving the members of your group a hard copy of your work, or an email copy that they can print, as people do a better job critiquing if they read it ahead of time rather than if the work is read out during the meeting. Most groups set a deadline of one or two weeks before the meeting date for material to be received.

Read all work submitted as carefully as if it was your own, and be as objective as possible. The writer might be your best friend, but you will be of no use to her unless you are honest in your feedback. While reading, or listening, to the work, jot down your reactions, questions, and comments as you read. Many critiquers read through a piece twice, once to react as a reader, the second time to analyze their reactions.

If you are critiquing something in manuscript form, feel free to mark typos and grammatical errors. Do not take up time during the critique session for these, as they can use up a lot of time and are rarely useful to anyone other than the writer. Since you will give the writer your copy of the manuscript, he will learn about the errors anyway.

Make sure you mention the strengths of a piece of writing as well as the weaker aspects. This is very important. Writers often don't know what they've done well any more than they understand what isn't working. I always begin and end a critique with a positive statement, whether the critique is written or given verbally in person. If a character comes vividly to life, tell the writer. If the flow and rhythm in a poem draw you effortlessly into it, make sure you mention this. Writers can become better writers by building on their strengths just as much as they can improve by learning about areas in which they are not as skilled. Plus, you will improve your own writing by not only pointing out what works well but also why it is working well.

Remember that you are never critiquing content. At the first meeting of my current writing group, there was a man present who clearly felt superior to everyone else. Along with stating his work never needed an editor (a red flag to anyone who has ever dealt with or been an editor,) he announced he hadn't read my story because it was about hockey and he didn't like hockey. I and another woman who, like me, is never shy to speak up, let him know in our always graceful and polite way that this was unacceptable if he wished to be a member of that group. He never came back.

It doesn't matter what the writing is about, you are analyzing the components that go into producing a good piece. For example, if it's fiction, you look at characterization, structure, point-of-view, dialogue, and so on. It doesn't matter if you don't feel you know much about those things. Do what you can and listen to the other comments so that you can learn from them. You probably won't always agree with everyone else's comments, but thinking about why you don't will sharpen your own analytic skills.

It's useful to word some comments as questions, instead of bald statements. For example, instead of saying, "This character's behavior makes no sense," consider asking, "Can you show this character's motivation more strongly?" Instead of saying, "This image in this poem doesn't fit with anything else," ask "Can you build in a smoother flow between images so that this one flows from the one before it and to the next one?" These are only examples, and so are not cast in stone, but I hope they help you understand what I mean, when I say questions are often best because they imply there is a way to solve the problem.

If you voice all comments, statements, and questions with the focus on the root cause of the problem rather than on the problem itself, they will be more useful to the writer, and better learning tools for you. Once a person understands why a problem exists, moving to the understanding of how to fix it comes much more easily than if all he is told is that the problem exists.

During the session, if one of your comments has already been given, briefly mention it anyway. It can be very useful to a writer to know how many people reacted in the same way to something.

All of these suggestions, and the ways you make use of them, will enable you to become a constructive critiquer.

When Receiving Feedback

Many groups have a rule that the person whose work is being discussed cannot speak, other than to ask for clarification of a point or because she couldn't hear something. At the end, when everyone has had their chance to speak about this piece of writing, the writer is allowed to ask any questions that weren't answered by the critique and comment, briefly.

This is a good rule, because there is always an impulse by the writer to defend the work. Remember, though, that it doesn't matter what you meant to do. If the readers are not "getting it", while there is a small possibility that they are all the idiots you are thinking they are, it's far more likely there is a problem and it would be worth your while to take a look.

Listen carefully to all comments and write them down. You may not remember them all, but also, you might not agree with some comments when you first hear them because it can be painful for you to hear that part of your beautiful baby is not perfect. No matter how experienced you are at being critiqued, nor how constructive the comments are, sometimes you will feel vulnerable. Write those comments down anyway, as when you look at them later, at a time when you feel more objective, you might find they have merit.

When you're considering the comments you get, remember that you don't have to agree with every one, and you don't have to make every suggested change. The work is still your own, so trust your mind and your instincts. As long as you keep an open mind about all the feedback, and consider it carefully, you can take what you think will make your writing stronger and leave the rest. There may be something to learn from a comment even if you don't agree it will help this particular piece of your writing, so it can still be useful.

Rewriting will be your responsibility, and so don't expect that a critique will provide all the answers. You can, sometimes, ask if anyone has a suggestion for how to fix a particular problem, but this should be done only sporadically. The amount of feedback of this sort that's available will vary from person to person and group to group. Make sure, though, that any piece of writing with your name on it has flowed from, not a committee, but your creative self.

As writers, we spend a lot of time alone. A critique group, as well as offering you ways to learn and improve, can also supply support and social times. Imagine being able to talk to people whose eyes don't glaze over when you discuss whether or not you should change this one word in your ten page piece. All of this is why, despite my tears at that one critique session, I continue to tell people, even when their eyes glaze over, of the benefits a group can offer.

Some Questions to Consider when Critiquing Fiction

What is the story about?

Does the beginning raise questions that are answered by the ending?

Is the story about a character who the reader comes to care about, and does this character has a goal to achieve or a problem to solve? Is doing so vitally important to the character?

Does the character encounter strong and believable opposition to doing so?

Does the story stay focused on the driving goal?

If there are several storylines, is each one driven by a character and a goal?

What did I particularly like about the writing?

Were there times I felt completely involved?

Where did this happen?

Did I find myself skimming at any point?

Did my mind wander?

Where did this happen?

Was I ever confused?

Did I have to go back and read any section again?

Where did this happen?

Did the characters come alive for me?

Which one(s) were most vivid and believable?

Did any seem stereotypical?

Were any unbelievable?

Was it difficult to understand any character's motivation?

If so, which ones?

Was the flow of language smooth?

Were there any speed bumps – places where I was pushed out of the reading experience?

Was the dialogue believable?

Did different characters speak with their own individual voices?

Does the story stay in point-of-view?

Might a different character's point-of-view work better?

Might a different type of point-of-view, for example 3rd person instead of 1st person, work better?

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