



The Give & Take of Critique

by Linda Sue Park

For most writers, critique is a crucial part of the writing process. If you have any experience with critiques, you already know that some critiques are more helpful than others are. Here are some guidelines for giving and receiving successful critiques.

THE PLAY

Whether your work is being critiqued by a group or one other reader (online or in real-life), the first rule of thumb should be this: The writer does not speak during the comments phase of the critique session. Not once. Not a single word.

Why not? Because the work must stand or fall on its own. When the piece eventually gets submitted and is read by an editor, the writer won't be there to say things like, "Well, what I meant there is..." or "That's supposed to refer back to..." The writer should listen, take notes, and listen some more. Later, when all the commenters are finished, there can be discussion including the writer. But not at first.

Some groups or partners exchange work in advance. Others read "on the spot." Both systems have their advantages, but for in-depth critiquing, reading the piece in advance and spending time on it before the meeting is invaluable.

GIVING

The method I like best is often referred to as "the sandwich." A commenter begins by saying something he/she likes about the piece, then goes on to point out weaknesses and finishes up with another positive comment—"sandwiching" the negative between two positives. When a writer hears something good first, he/she is more likely to be open-minded about the criticisms. And finishing with a positive point keeps the critique friendly.

Just as the writer should abide by the rule of not speaking during the critique, the commenters should abide by the "sandwich" rule. Everyone should offer both positive and critical comments on the piece. I can't count the number of times a writer has said to me, "My critique group always praises my work. That makes me feel good—but I end up not knowing how it can be improved." Once in a blue moon, maybe someone does offer a perfect or near-perfect piece for critique. But 99.99% of the time, a good critiquer will be able to offer helpful comments for improvement.

Conversely, people sometimes feel that a commenter has torn apart their work and has absolutely nothing good to say about it. These critiques are depressing at best and downright hurtful at worst. The "sandwich" method helps avoid either pitfall.

Exactly what are you looking for when you are reading someone else's work? It varies, of course, depending on the genre. Although every piece is different, the following give a general blueprint for what a critiquer should be looking for:

PLOT

- » Page turnability: Is the story interesting? Does it make you want to read on? Do you ever feel impatient and wish things would "get going?"
- » Problem: Does the main character have a clearly delineated problem confronting him/her? Does each scene develop either impediments to a solution or progress toward a solution?
- » Logic: Do the scenes connect in a logical manner? Is there something happening in the middle or at the end of the piece that simply doesn't make sense given the set-up?
- » Ending: "Unexpected inevitability"—has the writer laid the groundwork for the ending, even if it's a twist or surprise?

CHARACTER

- » Believability: Do the characters seem real? Do they talk and act like people you might know—even if they're hedgehogs? Do they have flaws, or are they too perfect? Do they have characteristics, quirks, idiosyncrasies that increase their individuality, or are they "generic?"
- » Empathy: Do you care about the character(s)? Do you feel anxious for them as they face their problem? Do you feel like cheering wildly or at least smiling if/when they finally solve it?
- » Growth: Has the character grown or changed in some way by the end of the story?

WRITING

- » An article of this length cannot, of course, cover all the writing points that a good critiquer should be on the alert for. But they can be put into a single concept:

Invisibility. Is the writing “invisible?” In other words, is the story so compelling and well written that the technique simply disappears? Or are you stopping as you read and thinking things like, “That sentence is awkward,” or “That’s three paragraphs in a row of solid description—it’s getting boring.” Critiquers should note wherever the writing pulled them out of the story.

- » It may seem ironic, but the goal is to help the writer achieve “invisibility” in his/her technique, so that what shines is not individual words or phrases—but the story itself.
- » One more point: In my opinion, critique groups are not the place for heavy line editing. If a piece is riddled with grammatical errors, it is tedious and difficult to point out these errors in a group setting. Such work is best done one-on-one, with an editing partner. The best a group can do in such cases is to point out to the writer that he/she has this weakness.

TAKING

The importance of listening when receiving a critique cannot be overstated. Coupled with this is the difficult task of not taking a critique personally. When a trusted commenter says, “This scene doesn’t work for me,” or “I really don’t think you need this paragraph here,” (and be forewarned! it will almost always be your very favorite paragraph!!) he/she is NOT saying, “You are a bad writer.” Good critiques focus on the writing, not the writer.

Let’s assume that the commenters have finished their “sandwiches,” and the writer is now allowed to join in the discussion. Where possible, the writer should pose his/her response as a question. Example: “Ann, you said this scene on page four is unclear to you. Would you say that’s due to characterization or scene-setting?” The writer should avoid making statements: “The scene on page four is a continuation of what happened on page two, but I had to stop there to explain Grandma’s will.” As a writer who presumably wants comments on your work, your job now is to receive responses and information—not to give them.

Once the writer is back home with a stack of scribbled-on manuscripts and perhaps a pad of notes, the real work begins. People differ greatly on how they work with critique comments, but here is the method I like best.

First, I sort the comments. I suppose this could be done in your head, but I actually make a list. Three columns at the top of a page: Yes / Maybe / No No No! I put brief notes under each heading based on the comments I received. Then I start revising. I start with the Yes column—the comments I love. You know what I mean—when someone says something and you think, “Eureka! That’s perfect—why didn’t I think of that! Thankyouthankyouthankyou!” I make those changes first.

Then I stop and think. A lot. This phase takes the longest. I think about the other two columns—especially about the items under No No No! If enough time goes by, my

wounded feelings about those negative comments subside and I’m able to be much more objective about them—rather than dismissing them emotionally.

Here are a couple of examples of how helpful this can be—one from each side of the fence. In one of my middle-grade novels, a character dies at the end. My critique partner thought the way he died didn’t work at all. She told me so, and made an alternative suggestion. I was utterly dismayed. This was my ending—the climax of the book! How could she say such a thing!? I let a few days go by and I decided to prove her wrong. I would write the scene her way just to show her how it couldn’t possibly work. I’m sure you can guess what happened. The scene ended up being similar to what she had suggested, although not exactly the same—because in trying to work out her suggestion, I stumbled onto something even better. This never would have happened had I dismissed her suggestion outright.

In another instance, my partner gave me a middle-grade of about 25,000 words to read. I read it and loved it—but I told her that it was not complete. Where she had ended the book was not the end of the story. I can well imagine her dismay in this case—here she thought she had finally finished and now I was telling her no? She thought about it for a while, then wrote a little more just to see where it would take her. She ended up with 37,000 words—and a beautiful story that feels truly complete. Now she finds it hard to believe she ever thought it “finished” initially.

I won’t deny that it’s a real balancing act, trying to decide which suggestions to heed and which to ignore, but believe me, it gets easier as you learn to trust your partners and gain confidence in your writing.

READY TO SUBMIT?

A critique group or partner should help you answer this question: Is a piece ready to submit? Here is my rule of thumb: A piece is ready to submit when it’s one of the BEST things I’ve ever read. It’s so good I can’t WAIT for my partner to send it out. I want to tell everyone about this wonderful story I’ve read!

How often do you feel that way? The truth is, not very often. And that’s the way it should be. Editors say things like, “Read a thousand books in your genre. Compare your story to theirs. If it’s as good as the very best of what you’ve read, it’s ready to submit.” (Can you imagine how much smaller slush piles would be if we all felt this way about our work and our partners’ work? Editors might even have time to write real rejection letters instead of sending forms!) Not, “This is such a sweet story. My kids’ class loved it when I read it to them.” Not, “I can’t believe that book got published. Mine is much better.”

No—the response of your crit partners and yourself should be, “This is one of the BEST things I’ve ever read.” Yes, it sounds like a tall order. But whether you’re a new writer trying to break in these days, or maybe a published author trying your hand at a different genre, that’s the standard you must achieve. And a critique group or partner you trust can help get you there. ☺