

Five Best Practices for Effective, yet Sensitive Critiques

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1. Establish Clear Critique Etiquette and Guidelines

Setting a few basic policies or guidelines for the critique can promote community, encourage participation, curb bad behavior, and help students understand their role in the critique process. Critique etiquette can either be presented by the instructor or created collaboratively by the class as a community building activity. While it may be helpful to outline protocol for activities such as eating or cell phone use, clearly outlining students' roles as both receiving a critique from peers as well as providing a critique for their peers can help foster trust between students.

Example guidelines for receiving a critique:

- Listen without interrupting
- Keep an open mind and really listen without getting defensive
- Do not take what the critic is saying as a personal attack, but as a suggestion for improvement
- Restate unclear comments; sometimes you might think they mean one thing but they really mean something else

Example guidelines for providing a critique:

- Critique the work, not the artist
- Be objective, especially if the work is not in a style or genre that you prefer
- Don't be vague; give specific suggestions for improvement
- Be polite; avoid harmful or rude language

2. Provide Vocabulary, Prompts, or Guided Questions

"I like it" is one of the most common comments made by undergraduate students when providing a critique—and one of the least effective. Depending on the course or level of students in the class, you may want to

consider asking students to reserve "judgment" responses in the beginning of the critique or possibly altogether. Instead, simply providing students with appropriate issues or specific vocabulary to use during a critique can establish a more directed critique. Prompts such as *"Is this work effective and why?"* or *"Are the formal elements supporting the conceptual ones?"* can lead to more meaningful conversations and guide student learning. Additionally, asking students to present a statement about their work, either verbally or in writing, can direct the critique towards a conversation about: *does the work meet the artist's goals?*

Example guidelines for discussion:

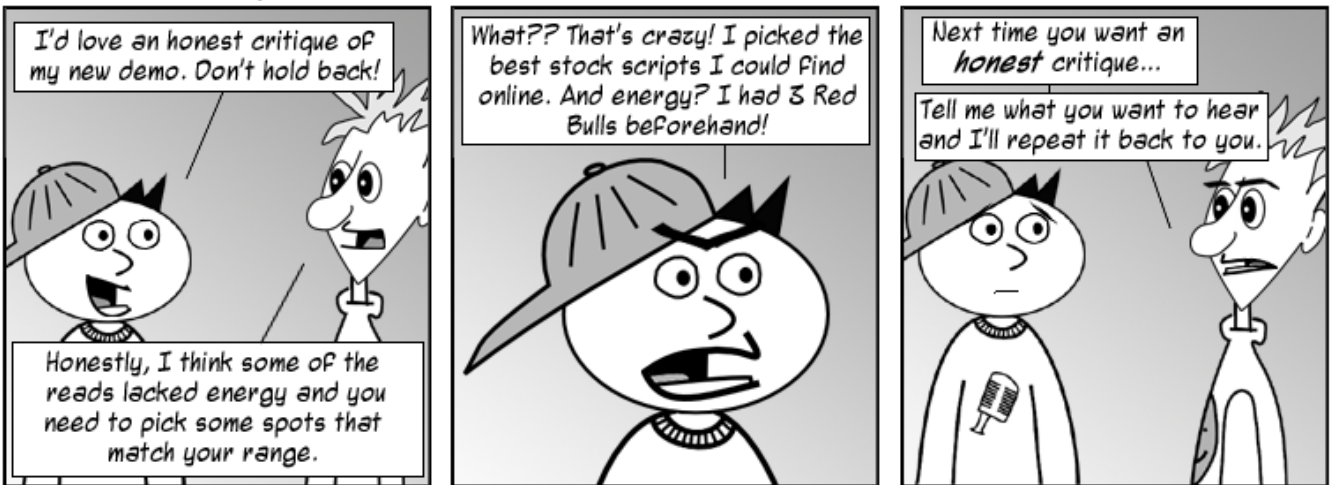
- Describe specific elements of the work without using words such as "beautiful" or "ugly"
- Describe technical qualities of the work
- Describe the subject matter. Are there recognizable images or icons?
- Is the construction or planning of the work evident?
- Identify some of the points of emphasis in the work
- If the work has multiple subjects or characters, what are the relationships between or among them?
- Describe expressive qualities in the work
- Does the work remind you of other things you have experienced? (i.e., analogy or metaphor)
- Does the work relate to historical or contemporary work in the medium?

3. Use a Variety of Methods

Face-to-face group critiques are a standard in undergraduate art classes, however adding some variety can often encourage greater student participation. Here are a few non-traditional options to consider:

- small group critiques

Honest Critique



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- anonymous critiques (use notecards or post-its)
- formal written critiques
- online critiques with student blogs or wikis
- visiting artist critiques
- fishbowl critiques
- work trades with other course sections

4. Pay Attention to Time

Timing is crucial to fostering an effective, successful critique. If a critique of one student's work varies in length of time from another, it can leave some students feeling slighted. This discrepancy can eventually break down the sense of community among students.

Consider setting specific time limitations for review and discussion of work and then stick with them. If one student's work is particularly time consuming or students are still actively discussing a student's work when the time is up, only allot more time to the work after a group vote or consensus. Another option would be to finish up the discussion after class online.

Other timing considerations:

- allow time for review; students need time to process ideas and responses to work
- silence is ok; don't fill up silences with your own thoughts—let students get to it their in their time

5. Align the Critique Learning Goals with the Course Learning Goals

With any course, it is a best practice to align the learning activities and assessments together to promote the achievement of the course learning goals. Critiques are often seen only as an assessment tool. However, they are also a valuable learning activity, which should promote course learning goals. Consider beginning the critique by sharing both the significance of the critique process itself, as well as the desired learning goal for that critique.

Example learning goals for students receiving the critique:

- Students will be able to draw a still life that demonstrates correct one-point perspective.
- Students will be able to perform movement sequences that build into larger dance combinations while demonstrating proper body alignment in motion.

Example learning goals for students providing the critique:

- Students will be able to analyze how the formal and technical elements in a photograph shape its potential meaning.
- Students will be able to perform a melody within a harmonic context and compare the tonal structure with that of their peers.

Criticism may not be agreeable, but it is necessary. It fulfills the same function as pain in the human body. It calls attention to an unhealthy state of things.

-Winston Churchill