

What Makes a Helpful Critique by Jadyn LaRiviere

Golden Rules:

- Be Kind
- Be Specific
- Be Constructive
- Know What is Brought to the Table (Expertise and Biases)

As the Writer

When to ask for critique?

- Only once you have beaten the gosh darn thing to death and you feel you cannot get further on your own.
- Only once you are open to feedback, and don't feel as if you'll be baring your exposed guts to a polearm.
- Only once you have a clear vision of the core heart of your story.

Checklist:

- I have **cut** or intentionally left the following words:

Adverbs (-LY)	Very*	Had
Completely	Just*	Then
Entirely	Really*	Something
Suddenly	Decide	Still
Unfortunately	Wonder	'Felt/feels
Think	'It' (specify noun)	her/his/their
Know	That	emotion/sensation'
		*barest minimum to cut
- I have added commas to the best of my ability
- I have read the work aloud to myself and made corrections
- I have done what I can to express the story to the best of my ability
- I have made a vow to continue writing even after my soul is bared for judgement

Know what you're asking for:

Vague expectations bring about vague feedback. If you know there are parts of your story lacking it's helpful to bring those to the reader's attention to get specifics. If you're looking for general vibes then you are up to the whims of that particular reader. Let your reader know what you're asking for.

Beta Readers Questions

Below are examples of beta reader questions. Beta readers are there once your story is as edited and polished as possible, so some questions may not apply to beginning critiques. But they are important things to consider when looking for reader feedback.

Questions:

After reading it for the first time, what is your first impression? Was it cohesive and compelling? Boring and confusing?

What is your first impression of (Character A)? Do you find him likable? Annoying? Boring? Interesting?

What is your first impression of (Character B)?

Are you able to visualize where the scenes are taking place?

What was your impression of (Character A) and (Character B)'s relationship?

Has your perception of any character in particular changed from your initial impression?

Is there any character in particular you feel you should/want to know more about?

Were any descriptions (scenes, emotions, people) rushed?

Were any descriptions or scenes too detailed or slow?

Did the end of this chapter make you want to read the next chapter?

Which parts were your favorite, compelled you, or made you want to keep reading?

Which parts of the chapter slowed you down or didn't interest you?

How did you feel about the development of (Subplot A)?

Anything you wanted to see more of/know more about?

Any predictions you have for scenes/character arcs still to come?

Any other impressions?

As the Reader

When to offer critique:

- Once you have time and mental space to consider the writing with respect.
- Once you are aware of the perspective you bring to the table.

Things to Consider:

Who am I as a reader?

You are an age, race, gender, class, genre-preferring, life-experience-having, important data point. One who has valuable insight based on the things you care about seeing. If you don't like gore and are critiquing splatter-punk, know where your bias is. If you are a romance enthusiast reading a romance novel, know what your expertise is. If you love pointing out where commas need to be, please do. If you hate when female characters are one dimensional and look for strong characterization, point out what works and when it's lacking. Your opinion is one opinion and you get to own it, you're not speaking for anyone other than yourself. But also, you

do represent the communities you're part of, you offer valuable insight as to what an over 50, former professional rugby player turned stay at home dad of six might have to say about this book, do that community justice. If you know that the crochet community gets ticked off when it's called *knitting*, it's your duty to help your writer by letting them know. Then your writer can decide either to poll the crochet community or leave their work unchanged and face the backlash later.

What do I even say as a critique?

Basics:

- Anything is better than nothing, even if it's not perfectly worded
- It's okay to not like the work and to say so, there's no need to blow smoke- just be kind and polite
- What's helpful to you the writer, the type of detailed feedback or areas pointing out how something could be improved, is the sort of critique you should try to offer other writers as a reader.
- Highlight and comment on the specific area of the document where the issue is, if it's an entire paragraph it's fine to have a comment at the end but be sure to reference where in the above text holds the issue.
- It's nice to make a sandwich with longer summaries, something positive, then the more critical feedback, then something else positive.
- At the end of the work (or each chapter if it's a longer piece) it's appropriate to leave a longer summary detailing your impressions and takeaways from the piece/chapter/story. Any overarching reviews or feedback can also go at the end.

Example:

"I enjoyed the work overall, mystery isn't usually my genre but I was compelled to keep reading. There was a strong sense of urgency that the characters needed to accomplish their goals but I struggled with tracking the 27 members of the group at times and think that some characters could be combined to have a smaller pool of 8-12. Some of the flashbacks were a bit too long for my taste and took away from what was happening in the moment. I would recommend staying in the present more so I feel more like I'm with the characters on their journey. You do a great job of crafting tense atmospheres with characters at odds with one another."

Types of Critique:

Grammar, Word Choice, Formatting:

(Things that could be improved about the literal text and comprehension of the writing)

"Should be a comma here."

“You could say ‘he walked’ instead of ‘he bent his knee to lift his foot and place it on the sidewalk and then bent his other knee while lifting his other foot to place it down’.”

“Is profligacy the best word here to describe 10-year old Mary’s use of her allowance?”

“Please use a readable font, this one is difficult to look at when in paragraphs.”

“New paragraph when there’s a new speaker.”

“You use past tense but now have shifted into present tense.”

Plot, Characters, and Story:

(The events taking place and the people involved)

“The middle dragged for me, it felt like they spent too much time shopping for shoes instead of worrying about the ticking bomb”

“I felt like Officer Mary’s character before now has been very capable in solving problems on her own but now without an obvious reason is deferring to Mark, a civilian”

“I was really invested in Moses’ character arc of escaping captivity and returning to start a revolution”

“You spent a few paragraphs describing a giant golden rat statue in the beginning and I was waiting for it to come into play and it never did which was disappointing”

“I loved the twist villain, I didn’t see it coming but feels satisfying in hindsight”

“I hated the twist villain, there wasn’t enough evidence in the text- it felt out of left field”

“I was confused as to why they didn’t go back and check on Madison after leaving her in the closet”

“It was difficult for me to track all the characters because their names all started with M”

Writing Style, Voice, and Flow:

(How the writing feels, narration style, and ease of comprehension)

“I feel like the paragraph talking about his sister would work better later when talking about the family tree”

“I got lost in all the talk about shoelace manufacturing that I forgot we were at a funeral”

“The narration feels bouncy and full of humor, but here it reads more stiff”

“I usually like straight to the point sentences and I can see your style is more purple prose”

“This metaphor not resonating with me the way I think you intended, maybe consider spending more time with this moment”

“This paragraph says the same thing multiple times, here’s how I would combine the ideas”

“I love how all the characters have unique speaking voices and use of slang”

Unhelpful:

(Bad, don’t do this)

“This sucks”

“Good job”

Unhelpful Writer:

Reader: “I was confused about this connection with the mouse trap”

Writer: “Actually you shouldn’t be confused because if you look up at the fourth paragraph, third sentence, I allude to the shadow of the soda can which implies that her father has been living in the walls and placing mouse traps in the house randomly”

So Writers, what to do with the critique?

Why are you asking for critique? Because that’s just what you’re meant to do? Or are you wanting to improve your writing? Resonate with an audience? Seek praise or validation? Some of the feedback might hurt or feel uncomfortable. Writing is translating your imagination into an exposed form. Some people might not *get* the story right away- but it’s important to discern when it’s an issue of the translator (the writing) versus what’s being translated (the story). The more that the reader and writer can agree on the core of the story, the easier it is to offer and receive feedback, and that’s why expressing expectations and genre are important. Genre is a promise, and readers are here to tell you whether you’ve delivered. When it’s too much like a polearm in your guts, take a break.

(EXAMPLE BELOW FROM CHICKADEE)

(EXAMPLE BELOW FROM CHICKADEE, 250 words about a bird talking to a cat in the backyard)

“So what is this prank you speak of?” Sienna asked the cat who was stretching its back legs and then the front, claws flexing with each effort.

“Ya see, whenever I get my afternoon snack, the doves always try and steal the crumbs. And I like to leave those to marinate in the sun for a few hours before I lick ‘em up.”

Sienna cocked her head to the other side now. “You never shoo them off?”

“I can’t be bothered to pick their grimy feathers out of my claws. And I still lose some of my snack. I wanna teach ‘em a lesson.”

Sienna was weighing her options. This would be the best spot to get seed from if it weren’t for the doves. “How ya gonna do that?”

Calcifer’s pink lips peeled back in a sinister toothy smile. He flicked his tail in the direction of his owner’s shed. “My humans keep all their *special* supplies in there. And I happen to know there’s a very spooky sheet with a mask on it in there. The doves never come around when that thing is out.”

Sienna knew what Calcifer was talking about. The wind ghost that ruled the tree right before the first frost.

“Hey, hey, hey!”

Sienna looked over at a particularly heavy raven landing on her branch. As the branch bowed under the extra weight, she started to slide towards the raven, smacking into its leg. She fluffed her feathers in indignation.

“I heard you wanna prank the doves. Count me in.” The raven squawked.