

# The Art of The Critique (Part 4)

Author: Robbie Matthews<none@none.com>

Part 4 in a series of several - The Etiquette of the Critique.

Well, we have now covered the need for Critiques, how to get them, and how to give them. What's left?

How to PHRASE your critique, in such a way that some high strung author does not come after you with a meat axe.

When doing a critique, you have to be honest. You are doing no one any favours if you say you liked it when you didn't, or gloss over its obvious faults.

At the same time, this is somebody's baby! Someone has sweated blood over this, and shyly thrust it into the light of day. They are waiting with anticipation, trembling perhaps, and their fragile egos are on the line here. A certain amount of diplomacy is called for.

There is a really fine line between 'brutally honest' and 'too wishy-washy', and it can be tricky at times to find. Not to mention that different people have different ideas of where this line lies.

There are two important thing to remember:

- A Critique is supposed to be about positive criticism ... you aren't supposed to just tell them their story is crap, you have to try and help them to fix it.
- In most Critiquing situations, the author you've just critiqued is going to be able to have a crack at you, too!

OK. Brutally honest, but tactful. Right. Tricky. How?

A good, well written story is not usually a problem. It's when the story needs a lot of work that you have to flex those old tact muscles.

A general guideline is to always start with a positive, and end with a positive. Just as there is no such thing as the perfect story, there is really no such thing as the complete stinker. There is usually something you can find nice to say about it. Perhaps some of the characters show promise, or the idea is interesting, or the author spelled his own name correctly.

Then proceed onto the meat of the matter. Then find something else nice to say at the end.

As I've stated several times, an author needs to develop a thick skin. However, it can take a while for this skin to develop, and the people most in need of good critique are usually the beginners who haven't had a chance to grow it yet. Your crisp words of advice are unlikely to be heeded if the author is out slashing his wrists after reading your critique!

It's also good to make clear that your comments are only opinions. Some people have a tendency to slip into lecturing mode. This can not only be offputting, but it can often steer the budding author in directions that are just plain wrong. There are certain rules of writing -- avoid passive voice, keep your POV close, etc,etc -- which are really just guidelines. I have seen some people quoting them as though they are carved in stone, and this is not a good thing.

The other issue here is the level of detail. If a story is well written, the sorts of improvements you can suggest are often extremely picky. This is good. In fact, it is often a rule of thumb that the closer the story is to being right, the finer the detail of the critique.

On the other hand, if a story is really seriously in need of trauma counselling, you can get too picky. Too much detail will swamp and discourage the author. Generally in those cases I stick to general advice on plot and so forth.

And finally, unless you know the author reasonably well, don't assume that he or she will understand technical jargon. Don't just say 'POV' or 'passive voice' and leave it at that. Try and explain what you mean and/or give examples.

Next: [Some examples](#).