

On Critiquing:

GUIDELINES FOR
GIVING & RECEIVING

Guidelines for Giving:

Wholly Show Up to the Critique Session

I know, I know. You're busy and important. You really need to pick up your pink pleather platforms from the shoe shop and swab the grout in the shower, but ALL is off the table when it's time for the critique session. Be present. Be attentive. Shut. Down. Thy. Facebook. Those cat memes and forward-to-forty-people-or-die-a-horrible-death-by-desert-spoon posts can wait. Your only job for the next hour or two is to help your fellow writers.

Kindness is Killer

Anything can be said with love. ANYTHING. Case in point: "I'm so in love with your character. She's spunky, multi-layered and slathered in Awesome Sauce. I adore how conflicted she is, and I really relate to her character flaws. Perhaps the boil on her nose shouldn't be quite so bulbous. It's distracting, but her confidence is inspiring."

More Filling than Cookie, Please

Please be positive. Point out the "good", before pointing out "the bad and the ugly." End on a high note. You're not just looking for what's wrong with the work. You're also looking for what's going right. (The bulbous nose example above is a good one.)

Writing groups call this the sandwich method (not sure who coined the phrase.) I like to think of an Oreo in reverse. Filling—Cookie—Filling. Positive—"Negative"—Positive. 'Course, I don't like the cookie. I usually toss those in the can. But this is a metaphor, people. If you like the cookie better than the filling, you're deranged. The point? Speak to what's working. Speak to what's not working. Then speak to more of what's working. Or... just remember not to only speak to what you don't feel is working. Consciously look for what is as well.

Speak to the work, not the writer

Here's the dealio... you're critiquing the work, not the writer. It's not often a good idea to use the word "you."

Let's say you're reading a story about a gnat carcass whose soul is still lingering near its body. The carcass itself is stuck under a battered oil tin, and a tertiary character is about to lift said oil tin, thus causing the papery body to begin a grand adventure traveling on the wind. The gnat's soul can't quite keep up to its physical form and the whole journey is about reuniting the two. Poor, little Louis the gnat.

Further, let's say there's some issue of the gnat carcass seeming too pulverized to actually detach from the bottom of the tin. You wouldn't say "you're too torn up to fly with the wind. You're never gonna get unstuck. Your guts are too melded to the can." Nope... don't say that. Rather, refer to the "character." Such as... "this gnat may be too bug-soupy, consider making him a little less tattered."

See how I did that? I was speaking about the protagonist, not the writer. This applies in memoir too. Consider the author to be the protagonist, not the person you're speaking to. Don't say, "you suck." Say, "I found this work to be sucky." <-- Okay, NEVER say that, but you get my gist.

Side Note: Note in the example above the use of "I". It's helpful to remember to utilize it. Eg: "I found this work to contain some suckage." Not "this work sucks." <-- NEVER say this.

Side, Side Note: OMGoddess, I'm totally writing this story of poor, little Louis the gnat.

Specifics, Specifics, Specifics

If you find a problem you're struggling with in the work, say why, and offer some solutions. Never say "I was knocked flat by boredom and now I have a concussion."



Explain WHY you're lying on the ground, unable to rise, and then offer some suggestions.

In other words, be specific with your criticism. It's not enough to say "I couldn't buy this." Tell the author why and offer suggestions, which they may or may not take.

You're Writers, So You Get that Words Matter

As I've suggested above, perhaps you don't want to use words like "suck", "suckage" or "sucky." "Boring" should probably be banned too, along with "trash", "rubbish", and "shite". Get creative, ye writers. Pull out your thesaurus if you must. Instead of boring, perhaps say, "the pace really slowed down here." Instead of "suckage" you might say "This one part seems out of character." Then, of course, explain why and offer thoughtful suggestions.

Remember: This Isn't Your Story

I get it. You feel such a strong pull in your third chakra that the writer's story that you're critiquing really needs to be a space mystery with a kidney bean protagonist, a murdered black hole, and a particularly sharp-tined fork, a wisp of blue cotton candy, and a spool of demonic thread as the suspects, but this isn't your story. Do offer suggestions, but try to keep suggestions semi-in-line with the author's story. Sure, give them cool ideas, but don't tattoo them on the writer's soul in ink that can't be removed, even by laser.



And definitely don't rewrite the story in your voice. Word choice suggestions and rephrasing for clarity = good. Rewriting the story about the kidney bean in space = not good.

The decision to take or leave your criticism and suggestions lies solely with the author.

But HELP, Where Do I Begin?

There are loads of different aspects of a work we can speak to: characterization, tone, premise, theme, conflict, character arc, story arc, imagery, external and internal conflicts, dialogue, style, plot, POV, setting, description... Do you have to speak to all? No... the critique group meetings aren't two weeks long. Do speak to what comes up for you when you're reading the work.

Guidelines for Receiving:

Wholly Show Up to the Critique Session

This bears repeating. I know, I know. You too are busy and important. You really need to pick up your argyle and alligator sweater from the cleaners and swab the toilet in the guest bath, but ALL is off the table when it's time for your critique session. Be present. Be attentive. Shut. Down. Thy. Facebook. The generic "Happy Birthdays" you write to those twenty sort-of friends can wait till your time is up. Your only job for the next hour or two is to scoop up some help for yourself.

Hush! No... really, hush

While you're being critiqued don't allow a single sound to usher forth from your mouth. Talking is not allowed on your part unless you're choking on a particularly stiff leaf of kale and you need to gasp the words, "Lassie, find Timmy."

Yes, it's hard. I once found myself wanting to whine, "But, I meant for the stale Teddy Graham to dive from the ledge into the tub of rainbow-colored Jell-O. It's thematically significant." However, I didn't utter a word. (Though I might have been thinking Screw 'em if they don't understand my depth and complexity.) I kept that snippet locked deep, deep in my mind.

Hush while you're being critiqued. Zip your lip. You can talk after every person present has discussed your work.

Leave your ego out of the critique. Literally. Tie it up with Girl Scout knots. Seal it in a vault with forty gallons of Gorilla Glue. This isn't about you. It's about the work. It's not personal. You are not your work. Yes, it may be an extension of who you believe yourself to be, but, again, this isn't about you. As brilliant as we may think we are in our process of penning the next Great American novel, there are likely still some turds floating around in there. Be open. Be receptive. Be willing to glean a bird's eye view of your work to see where someone may be right. Let go of attachment. You can unlock your ego when the critique session is all over. Then you can rage and storm and break stuff. Until then allow yourself to be defenseless.

But Which Opinion Do I Listen To?

Rhonda thinks I should add a hairless albino bat that shoots guano out of every orifice as it flies. Salvatore thinks I should layer in ballerina paraphernalia as part of the theme with blood-filled ballet slippers and tattered ribbons. Four other folks think my protagonist and antagonist sound too much alike. Seven people think my story would be more powerful in first person POV. What's a writer to do?

The best advice I can give is: There are no rules. If seven or eight people in a group of ten are telling you something's wrong, it's a good bet that something is indeed off. If what one person, like Rhonda or Salvatore, is suggesting just doesn't feel true for your story, ignore the suggestion. Or... if you really like the ballerina theme and Salvatore is on to something big. Take it. Make it yours.

Be open. Listen to every piece of criticism and advice. Weigh some more heavily (like that from the majority.) But also... stick to your gut. I had a short story critiqued where eight out of twenty people told me not to head hop on the last page. I thought the majority should win and I changed it so that my character spoke his part. It never felt right. Months later, in a conversation with an award-winning author, I was told that writers are allowed to break the rules. (Though it's good to have a deep understanding of the rule before you break it.) I went back and changed that last page to include the head hop. It just felt right.

It's worth listening deeply to everything that's being said, letting it sit for a couple days, and feeling into what is right for your story. But... be open. Sometimes the stuff we immediately disagree with, and stick to our guns on, is the stuff we really do need to change.

When All is Said and Done

Once every single person has uttered every single word they have about your story, THEN you can speak. But try not to defend or argue or issue hexes. Instead ask for clarification. Pick the brains of all the writers in circle with you. Allow them to give you some ideas. Ask questions. Suck the marrow of your time in the scalding seat until the bone collapses and crumbles.

Okay, Dear Wordsmith,

I'm sure you've gathered that I had quite a rollicking good time writing this, but I don't want to give the impression that this isn't some serious business.

Don't be fooled. It is.

This is a writer's creation. Something they've labored and poured over a thousand and one times. Given birth to, really. Be respectful. Give writer's the same kindness, respect, and niceties that you would want when it's your turn to give up your baby for feedback.

Critiquing is an interesting game colored by our own written work, thoughts, perceptions and experiences. It can be difficult to keep our own works-in-progress and our own editing issues out of our critiques of others' work. Try.

Case in point: I had just come out of an amazeballs class on Description wherein the instructor had read H.P. Lovecraft. I was swooning and drooling over. Every. Single. One. Of Lovecraft's words. Oh, and hearing that instructor read it was like dark heaven. Amazing. How did Lovecraft choose each word so brilliantly; so precisely? How could I do that in my own novel and set a tone like he does? How did he make me feel that level of foreboding based on his word choice? How can I do that in my novels?

All of these questions knocked around in my mind as I headed to critique one of my fellow master's program peeps. I had completed her critique days before and loved her story and her writing. As she began the session by reading her first few pages, I had this brilliant idea: Oooh, she should work on her word



Now... Ponder This:

"When people tell you there's something wrong with a story, they're almost always right. When they tell what it is that's wrong and how it can be fixed, they're almost always wrong." Listen to what people think doesn't work for your story, and then figure out how you want to fix it." ~ Neil Gaiman.

choice too! For wasn't that in the forefront of my own mind in terms of my work? I was literally jumping up and down in my seat, waiting for my turn to tell her my brilliant piece of advice. When the group finally came around to me, I discussed the suggestions I had made days earlier and then let ooze my shiny idea for her. I went on and on and on about word choice and H.P. Lovecraft. I sat taller in my seat. I adjusted my glasses. I pursed my lips. I was so proud.

I left the critique session and within two minutes I realized my error. I had colored, outside the lines, all over her beautiful "picture" with my own editing crayons. Not good. Not appropriate. Not right. There was absolutely nothing wrong with her word choice. Rather, there are things wrong with my word choices in my novel.

Obviously, our own works-in-progress are always in the background of our psyches, but we must close those books and put them up on a shelf too high to reach when we're regarding someone else's work.

And... If my words haven't sunk in... read these by Shannon Reed below:

If Jane Austen Got Feedback From Some Guy In A Writing Workshop

Dear Jane,

I don't usually read chick lit, but I didn't hate reading this draft of your novel, which you're calling *Pride and Prejudice*. I really liked the part where Elizabeth and her aunt and uncle went on a road trip, which reminded me of Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* (also about a road trip — check it out!). Anyway, good job. I do have a couple of notes to share, in the spirit of constructive criticism.

So, a big question I have is “Why?” Why does Elizabeth do the things she does? Why does Mr. Darcy do the things he does? Why does Mrs. Bennet do the things she does? Have you read *Hamlet*? I feel like you could really learn something from how Shakespeare (the author) has Hamlet tell readers why he's doing the things he does.

Another problem I noticed: Mr. Wickham (great name, by the way, evoking both a strong but flexible plant, and an earthly, bestial pig) is in the army, but you don't make use of that. What if Mr. Wickham, instead of just being sort of a scoundrel (Again: why?), is a scoundrel because he's suffering from his experiences in the war? (Which war, btw?) That way he could tell Elizabeth about it, and we would be able to see that she's not just an independent young woman, but also a really good listener. He could tell some jokes, too, to liven up the mood, and show that Elizabeth has a good sense of humor. This could be the middle section of the book, like five or six chapters in there.

Also, why five sisters? How about just two? Combine Jane and Kitty. Or, better, make one of the sisters a brother (named “Jim,” maybe?), and then he could be the narrator who mentions his sisters from time to time! Like Hamlet!

While I'm on the sisters, is it just me, or does everyone treat Kitty really badly? Personally, I want to say “Huzzah!” to Kitty, and it's annoying that everyone else — literally everyone else — wants to hold her back. Even you, I think— and, sorry, don't mean to hit too close to home here, but... I'm just saying that I would totally court Kitty. She's got a great sense of humor. But anyway, if you change her to Jim, problem solved!

A few other concerns: Mrs. Bennett is annoying, and you don't have any people of color. Also, there aren't a lot of men in this book. Only about the same number as there are women. I was thinking that what you could do is have Mrs. Bennett be dying, but give her a black best friend. Like Othello? (Have you read it? It's also by Shakespeare, fwiw.) The Othello character could be her butler, maybe? There you go: three problems solved. You're welcome!

I don't know if you noticed this, but there's a lot about hair ribbons here. Did you mean to do that? Maybe you could develop them into a kind of motif throughout, the way Shakespeare uses a skull in *Hamlet*? Maybe, when Mrs. Bennet is dying, she could ask to hold a hair ribbon? And Othello the butler could bring it to her, and tell her a story, or, better yet, get Wickham in there to tell her about the war. Oh! Perfect: just have Wickham, Jim and Othello talk about the war, while Mrs. Bennet lies unconscious in the background, holding a ribbon.

What do you think about *Jim, Othello, and Wickham: Brothers in Arms* as a title instead of *Pride and Prejudice*?

Anyway, while this isn't something I would pick up on my own to read, I still enjoyed it more than I thought I would. Thanks for letting me take a look, and let me know if you need any more help with it.

Keep writing!

Tim

I hope you've enjoyed my take on how to give and receive criticism in writing groups. None of these ideas are new, folks. They've been around since the first critique of story-painting in caves. ("Hey, your cave bear's head is too large for its body and it wouldn't be standing quite like that. Maybe have some marmot dangling from its maw.") **Remember:** Take it seriously. Show up. Be kind. Be helpful. Soak it up. That is all.

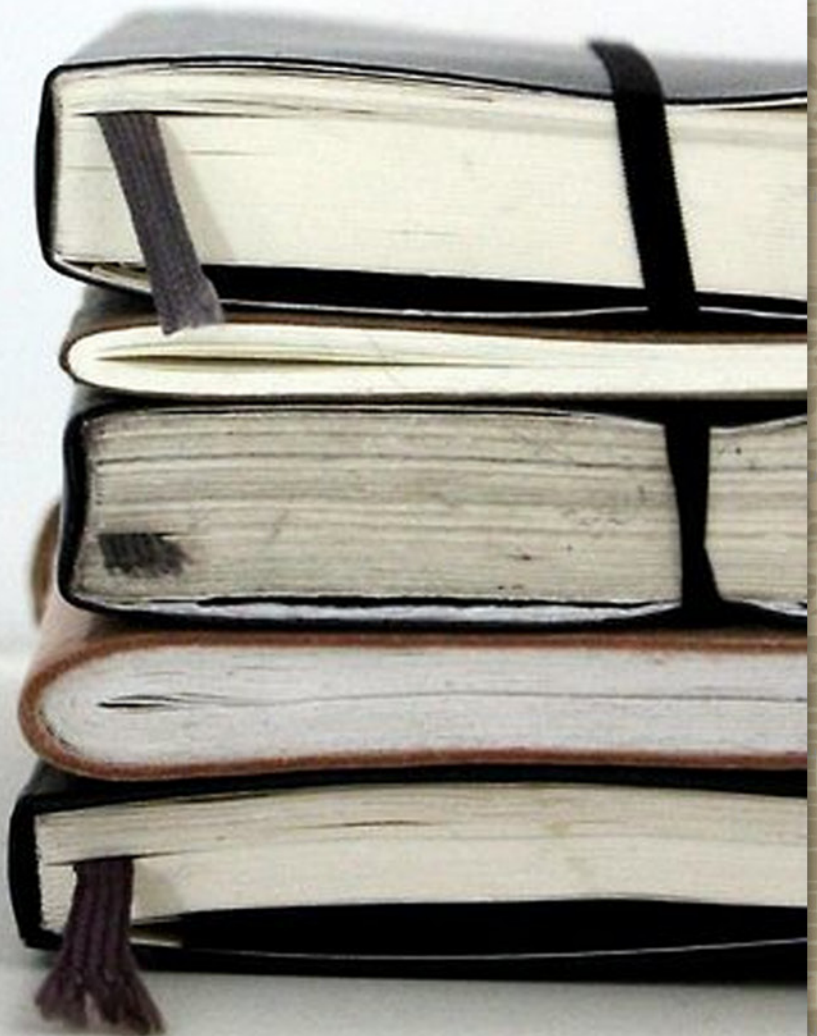
With large dollops of love,
Melanie Bates

You can find me drinking Black Pearl Oolong and hanging out here:



I'd so love to hear from you!
Share your thoughts, wax poetic,
spill the beans, tell me a story, inquire
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About Melanie:



I'm a Book Shaman, a Life Coach and, above all, a Writer (with a dash of nomad and nondescript heathen tossed in for good measure.) I began my writing career at the age of seven when I penned my first brilliant short story about witches with carbuncles. As a teenager my writing leaned toward the morose when I attempted to write my vast memoir at the age of fourteen. Finally, at seventeen, with my towering experience in regards to the matters of love, I wrote a few pages of a romance novel. I'm currently working on a young adult fantasy trilogy and am enrolled in an MFA in Creative Writing/Writing Popular Fiction.

My 10,000 hours (of Malcolm Gladwell fame) in "applying ass to chair", obtaining a Bachelor's in English/Creative Writing and devouring thousands of books, spawned my Book Shaman practice where I have helped *New York Times* bestselling authors to "transmute fuzzy thoughts into language people can understand." As a content editor I have used my experience to bring structure and form to some really amazing books that line the shelves of your local bookstores. I bring accountability, partnership and process to my writers, which allows them to face the blank page and actually pen their brilliant work.

I also get a super-charged kick each day out of coaching visionaries and solopreneurs who are ready to set out on their hero's journeys, but can't quite find their way. Together we map brilliant paths toward their futures, set and hold bold intentions and slay the dragons that are blocking them from their life purpose. Once they arrive at their destinations we begin building the foundations of their empires.

I've moved over thirty times, hence the nomadic nature, but for now I reside in the Wild, Wild West with the loves of my life: my boyfriend and three pups - So-Kr8z, Sancho & Chloé. To some this urge to move might seem exciting, however, there have been times I've ended up in the deepest bowels of our great Mother Earth. For example, I spent a year living in Rawlins, Wyoming where I was blown back and forth across the road and where I ran home from school every day on the lookout for dark vans that kidnapped children. I once peed my pants while frantically searching for my latchkey.

