



LADDER WRITERS

A Guide to Critiquing

1. What to write

Where to start

- To begin, **read the entire story without stopping** to get an initial impression of the work, before delving into the finer details.
- Read the story as if you were **reading for pleasure**; the critiquing will come later.
- **Write a short paragraph** about your first impression.

What to think about after your initial reading

- Look for sections which really **grabbed** you. Start to think about why these sections were **better** than others.
- Did the story **grip** you from the start?
- Did you **enjoy** reading it?
- If you **didn't enjoy it** but can imagine it **appealing to a particular audience**, make sure you take this into account in your critique.
- Do you think that the story has **sales potential**?

The next step

- Now read the story again **more carefully**.
- As you're reading **write down anything** that occurs to you.

These are a few of the things you can include. You won't be able to fit them all into one critique, so choose the ones which seem most relevant:

Plot

- Does the story **begin** at the right moment, and not too early? You can't afford too much of an introduction when writing short stories.
- **Is the plot credible/conceivable?** Are there too many unrealistic coincidences?
- Is the pace **too fast or slow?** Do you feel rushed or bored?
- Do you think the different sections of the plot are told in the **right order?**
- Point out anything you **like** about the plot i.e. an unexpected twist that genuinely surprised you, or originality.
- Were you **confused or lost** at any point?
- Are there too many **unnecessary words or sentences?** For short stories, every word must make a contribution. Is there too much going on, or too many subplots?
- Is the plot **focused** or does it stray away from its purpose?
- Is there **conflict** in the story, i.e. a personal struggle/emotional conflict? Are there too many or not enough conflicts?

Characterisation

- Which characters were **engaging**, and which weren't? What was it about them that captivated, or failed to captivate you?
- Did you get a sense of the characters' **completeness?** Did you believe they had lives outside of the story?
- Was the characters' **dialogue** in line with what you understood about their personalities? Did you feel that the amount of dialogue suited the characters' and the style of the story?
- Did the characters' **interact** with each other in a believable and interesting way? Could you see evidence that this interaction had some sort of impact on the characters?

The Ending

- Did you feel **satisfied** when you reached the end of the story? Did it feel like it ended too suddenly? Look out for the use of a **deus ex machina** e.g. when an unexpected event occurs suddenly to conveniently resolve the final conflict.

Other things to look out for

- What were your **favourite moments**?
- Was the **point of view** consistent across the text? One thing to look out for in first-person stories is for the narrator to say something they couldn't possibly know.
- Did we get the chance to **interpret the situation** or were we told exactly what was happening and what to think?
- Point out any **areas of description** that really **engaged** you and say why.
- Was the story **easy to read**? Were the sentences too long? Was there variation in sentence length and structure?
- **Originality** – if you find anything original in the story compliment the writer – originality is crucial to good writing.
- Write a list of any **spelling or grammatical errors** rather than wasting words in the critique.

Review the short paragraph you wrote initially

This is still important even now you have done a much closer reading, because it contains your initial impression. Make sure you use it when writing your final critique.

2. How to Write it

- Start on a **positive** note, saying what you enjoyed. Point these sections out. The author needs to know what was good as well as what could be improved upon
- Don't waste too many of your words **quoting** from the text.
- If you read something you **don't like**, it's **important not to be rude**, but equally important **not to give compliments you don't mean**. It's often better to give general advice on basic story elements such as plot, characterisation and dialogue.
- **Point out a flaw by comparing it to something you did like** i.e. if there was a weak character, give credit to the author for the characters you did like, and suggest that the other characters be developed in this way.

- **Sandwich a criticism with compliments** i.e. if you didn't like a piece of description the author used, point out the author's strengths and suggest working on the description so it doesn't detract from the strong points.
- **Give evidence for every opinion.** It is often hard to pin down why we have these reactions, but with careful thought you should be able to, and if you can't, leave it out.
- Always **phrase as opinion** not fact.
- **Don't try to be persuasive.** Write as if you're just making suggestions i.e. 'perhaps you should do this'
- **Don't generalise** 'why would any man'.
- **Avoid the commanding tone** like 'put a comma there'. You don't have the authority to make demands.
- Don't talk about **rules** of writing, there aren't any.
- **Don't use capitals**, which can come across as rude.
- **You can't** get away with rudeness by saying 'I'm going to be honest', 'no offence, but', **this doesn't make your wording any more appropriate.**
- **Don't try to rewrite the author's plot** – it belongs to them and not to you.
- **Address the writer as though you have full confidence in their capability.**
- **Don't be afraid to critique something** if it's not written in a **genre** that appeals to you.
- And remember, this is just your opinion, you do not have authority over the writer.

It may seem like a lot to take in and put into practice, but you will find that by regularly analysing and critiquing others writers' work you will develop a useful skill you can apply to your own work.