

LSS CRITIQUING GUIDELINES

An important part of our classes is reader feedback. This is the testing ground for your stories/poems...the first time the public will be seeing your baby.

Sending a story/poem to an editor is the ultimate goal, perhaps, but most editors are too overwhelmed with piles of daily submissions to take the time to critique your work. They give it the “accept” or “reject” stamp and move onto the next piece. Here you can find out why an editor might not accept your story/poem, involve yourself in discussions, improve the piece and also improve your ability to discern what works and what doesn't in other people's writing.

There will be all levels of writers in classes with you, from beginning to advanced. Some may have less confidence in themselves and their opinions than others. All this will show in the variety of critiques given for any piece, and as a recipient you have to remember this and value each one for the effort and sincere wish to help the critiquer has. The only way a beginner can learn is by making mistakes, imitating others, through trial and error. Even those who are used to giving crits make mistakes or don't thoroughly read a story/poem at times and miss the intended meaning. Nobody's ever going to hit it right a hundred percent of the time, so patience, tact and good humor are called for to keep the critiquing system working smoothly.

***THE #1 RULE OF CONSTRUCTIVE CRITICISM: NEVER criticize the author. No personal comments or attacks, it's all about the writing and ONLY the writing.**

***GIVE THE KIND OF THOROUGH CRITIQUE YOU'D LIKE TO RECEIVE**

One of the best ways to crit a story/poem is to read through it fairly quickly, making notes about what you think works or clangs. Then go back and use the checklist below to examine the story in detail. The great thing about critiquing is that you learn while dissecting other people's stories/poems!

- Opening: Does the story/poem grab your attention from the first paragraph, or even better, the first line? Does it get to the point or does it drag? Could it be cut altogether?
- Characterization: Do the characters step off the page? Are they realistic, or if not meant to be (aliens, for example), then are they interesting? Do they do their job?
- Conflict: Does the story have a strong conflict that drives the characters? Does tension about how it will be resolved exist?

- Theme: What's the theme of the story? Is it strong?
- Dialogue: Does it sound natural? Wooden? Does the dialogue move the story forward or slow it down? Remember, some stories may not have actual character dialogue, but rather a sort of running monologue in their heads or similar. Does lack of actual speech matter, or does the story work without?
- Voice: Does the narrative voice of the story work? Is it noticeable, should it be?
- Language: Does the author's choice of words add to or detract from the story? Are there too many adjectives/adverbs? Good descriptions or not enough?
- Rhythm: are the sentences varying in length to set the pace, keep the story from sounding monotonous?
- Plot: Does the story stick to its plot, does it digress?
- Setting: Are scenes clearly drawn through the five senses? Are transitions between settings/scenes smooth?
- Ending: Does the story end in a manner that satisfies? Does it end where it should or is it cut off, does it drag on too long?
- What is the main feeling/point you think the author is trying to make? Was s/he successful?
- Don't forget to comment on things that left an impression and things you didn't understand/didn't think worked.

When making comments, be careful how you phrase them! You may be joking, but the author could take your comments as insults. Be clear when you comment and always be aware that it could be misinterpreted.

Say things like:

“I thought the second paragraph was hilarious (all those feathers & the chicken flattened on the truck's grill especially), but the opening could probably be shortened. For me, it dragged, took too long setting up the scene with the chickens.

I didn't understand why your character shoplifted the pens...maybe some background would make his actions less out-of-the-blue?

The images you used in the poem were all so “pastel” except for the one in line 12. It was jarring to me, and didn't seem to work as well as the others.

Don't say:

The opening sucked, I think you're a terrible writer.

This was great! Brilliant! (Sure, it's an ego-stroke to get gushing crits like this, but in the end, what have you learned as an author? What have you taught as a critiquer?)

The whole story bored me; the characters were flat and the dialogue awful. You should make the hero rescue the heroine instead of letting her float down the river. Also, you should...

Remember: You are not the ultimate authority on what's right and wrong in a story, unless it's your own. Please don't tell others how to write!

*FOR THOSE RECEIVING CRITIQUES

Thank the people who took the time to read and comment on your story, whether they liked it or not. You don't have to defend/explain your work to anyone. A "Good point, I'll have to think about that" will suffice. But if honest and intelligent questions are asked, answering them may make your story/poem clearer in your mind. Discussion is a good thing! Writers lead solitary working lives through the nature of the beast. Whenever you can, get together with other writers and talk craft. These classes are the perfect opportunity to do just that.

Don't take a critiquer's comments personally. They're directed at your story/poem, not at your worth as a human being. Learn from them, dismiss them, take the advice to make changes. However you decide to use the crits, in the end it is your choice. If you don't want to change a single word, that's your right!

There will always be those who don't like or perhaps get the meaning of your work. That's because people come from different backgrounds, bring to a reading a whole life that you may know nothing about. Having someone not like your work doesn't lessen your ability as an author. Use the opportunity to try and see through their eyes, you might surprise yourself in what you learn!

The writing world is tough, tough, tough. It's all about competition. Authors have to learn to take rejections from editors/publishers with a shrug. If you really want to succeed, you will. You'll learn and you'll keep trying and you'll eat rejections like popcorn. This is the place to start.

