

Give & Get Helpful Critiques

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<http://greatstorybook.com/give-get-helpful-critiques/>

This entry is part 7 of 8 in the series [How to Start](#)

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A recent Writer's Meeting with one of my students this week ended in an interesting conversation about how people critique writing. What became clear is that most people have no idea how to do it. This is about how to give and get helpful critiques.

It's important to get helpful critiques *before* you show your manuscript to an editor - or anyone else in the publishing business.

That means finding the *right* people to read and give the *right* feedback on what you've written.

“Don't hurt my baby!” This is how we feel about our manuscripts. But to get good feedback, you have to be willing to crack through to the core.

Why this is so important:

- **If you get great feedback, it can be inspiring. It can give you exactly what you need to make your writing even better.**
- **If the feedback you get back is too weak, too flat – or too *harsh*, it can be deflating. Worse, it can make you really doubt your ability to write anything at all.**

How do you get a helpful, inspiring Critique? That's what I want to discuss.

What You'll Get Here:

- Why Facebook critiques are a bad source
- Who to ask for a critical read
- What to ask for from a Critical Reader
- How to be a Critical Reader

About Facebook Requests for Crits

If you make the mistake of posting a portion of your work-in-progress on Facebook (or any other social media), and ask for feedback, be warned. This is perhaps the worst possible way to get useful edits and notes from fellow readers.

More than that, unless you plan on publishing the final project yourself, you should never, ever do this. You will not be able to sell [First Rights](#), because making your material freely public is a form of distribution. No publisher will touch it.

(If you're wondering: yes, most [Acquisitions Editors](#) today will ask if you've posted or published any part of your manuscript online and they'll want to know the form and function of that in detail.)

About Family and Friends

Whether you ask family and friends or not is something you have to decide on a case-by-case basis. If your mom is a professional editor or a teacher, then she might be a great reader. But not necessarily, not if she doesn't know what it is you need to know from her.

I'll explain more about that in a minute.

Who Should You Ask?

All your Critical Readers should be people you know personally, or someone you've met through a shared friend.

NOTE: I do recommend hiring a professional editor, but you should have Critical Readers give you feedback before you do that. The draft you hand an editor should be your best possible work (so far). Don't give them the 3rd draft, give them the 20th – the draft you believe is ready for an [Agent](#) or [Acquisitions Editor](#).

That way, you get the most value from your money. *If your draft is too rough, the feedback you get will not be as detailed or as advanced as it would be if your writing were more polished.*

What Happened This Week

The student I met with this week told me that she had shown her manuscript to three other people: her husband, a close family friend who is a professional editor and to a self-published writer. She said the feedback she got from them didn't help her at all and even made her feel like maybe she should just give up.

I started to worry that maybe she wasn't good at receiving critiques – some writers have enormously fragile egos, and if you don't blow sparkles all over your feedback, they will hate you for the rest of your days.

But that wasn't the case. I gave her my feedback and she took furious notes, asking me questions when she wanted more detail or an example. She was extremely receptive, so I wondered what the problem was with her other Critical Readers. It should have been a good experience for her, not the horrible doubt-stewing fest she actually had.

After talking about the whole thing in-depth, the reasons those Critiques went so badly became very clear. The Readers had no idea what she wanted or needed to hear. (I'll explain how to handle this, below.)

What you can expect – generally.

If you hand over your manuscript (or any portion of it) to a reader and expect them to know how to give you helpful feedback - be prepared for disappointment. If they've never done something like this before, they won't know how to be helpful.

So what I recommend is this: when you ask someone for a critical read and they say yes, tell them exactly what it is you're looking for in terms of feedback. For example, if you just want a basic spelling and grammar check, tell them that.

If you're concerned about the dialogue in particular, let your reader know.

Now, you may well want a thorough nit-picking of everything in your manuscript. You can tell your reader that – but you should also be reasonable, especially if that reader is doing this as a favor.

You've got to be really clear and even specific about where you need feedback and the way you'd like to get it.

- If you want to get notes on a separate page, ask for that.
- If you want scribbles directly in the manuscript, ask for that.
- If you want to have a Skype or in-person meeting, then ask for that.

Not everyone needs or wants the same thing. That's why it's a good idea to be specific.

How to *Start* a Critique (turning the tables)

There's always something that needs fixing, refining and rewriting. There's always something good about it too.

So start with what you *like* about the read. Don't look for a certain number of Good Things. Simply say whatever works and be completely honest about that. Don't hold back on saying good things!

If it's really only one thing that's solid - talk about the one thing. If it's more, then list those out, all of them. Really, this is only fair, because if you're going to give feedback then the good stuff should also be given time and attention.

A critique is never just about the garbage. It should be comprehensive.

After you express what is working in the story, talk very openly about what flops. Don't hold back here, because this isn't a place for half-truths. If the protagonist doesn't feel like the main character, then say that - it isn't enough to say, "it needs work."

Just say it.

Don't be mean about the criticisms, but also don't sugarcoat them. Simply state what is terrible (if terrible is the right word) about the piece - in the same way a weather reporter would discuss a storm.

Mistakes in writing, like storms, are a simple fact. There's no need to apologize about it and there's no reason to pull out all your hair over it.

Remember that it isn't the writer who is being criticized, but the writing.

Taking Note

As a writer, you've got to listen to the feedback and take note. That isn't to say the Critical Reader might not be mistaken. But do accept it as their valid feedback. Whether you act on it or not is always, as ever, entirely up to you.

Please: Don't ever resort to name-calling. It will only end unwell, with a permanently broken relationship. There's no need for that, and deteriorating into meanness isn't fair. It also has nothing to do with a critique.

But if you get lucky and find someone who is able to give you helpful and inspiring feedback on your writing, do not make the mistake of undervaluing that. It's a rare and special thing to find Critical Readers who are simpatico and can give you feedback the way you need it.

Likewise, keep all this in mind the next time someone asks that *you* critically read something. You have it in your power to give your fellow writer inspiration and genuine help, or to squash them.

Writers, perhaps more than anyone else, understand that words really do matter.

Keep creating, no matter what.

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