

Notes on Constructive Feedback/p. cizmar

The constructive feedback system we use in Rough Writers is based on a critical response technique developed by Liz Lerman, a MacArthur “Genius” Grant-winning choreographer. Her goal was to find a way to provide useful information for artists in various phases of the creative process, that is, information focusing on the value of the piece, the in-progress nature of the work, and the intentions of the author, rather than the desires of the person to whom the work is being presented. That’s the important underlying principle: How can we help the author create the best work that he/she intends? Thus we banish words like “should,” as in “You should do x,” and we banish the well-meaning but hackneyed rules offered by some writing schools/coaches/bloggers/etc. And, of course, personal attack is never allowed. We want to help open our fellow writers’ imaginations, rather than shut them down. Lerman uses four steps, more complicated than ours—but that process takes much longer. In RWs, we distill the process to three steps.

RW Three-Step Feedback Process

1. Statements of Affirmation

We tell the author what we liked—which is something that people forget to convey to the author. (So is it any wonder that the writer, who is in the dark on this topic, goes off and does revisions on the very thing we loved best about the writing?) No matter how short the piece, or in what stage of development, we give the writer information about what we like, plus what was most interesting, memorable, exciting about what we just heard. The things we mention provide signals to the writer, who can then contemplate what we’ve said and interpret this in a way that matters to the writer personally and artistically

2. Neutral Questions from Responders

At this point, the idea is to simply ask for points of clarification and to pose neutral questions (e.g., What was the mood you were going for in this scene?). Often the question, though we attempt to phrase it in a neutral manner, becomes a way of stating an opinion about what might not be working. The point in this segment, though, is to merely pose questions that may provide the author with a new way of thinking about the writing, or to alert the author to anything that is confusing. The questions are intended to recognize that the work has value and allow the writer to hear feedback in a way that is not an attack and that is not prescriptive. Ultimately, it’s up to writers to consider what kind of work they want to create—and how they want to fix it. Our questions can help steer the writer’s thoughts. Example of opinionated question: Why is that color so dark? Example of neutral question: What type of tone were you going for?

3. Permissioned Opinions/Ideas for Revision

In this section, we offer ideas for revision, stating opinions about what we feel needs improvement. But we are NOT to be prescriptive, issue demands, or say, You SHOULD. These are ideas for the writer, not requirements. The author has an intended outcome. The author knows what it is. It is the author’s work. Not ours. At any point, the writer is allowed to say, “Thanks, I’ve heard enough. I’m on overload. We can stop talking,” etc.

Now, of course, we stray outside these boundaries—partly because the discussion becomes a fluid conversation, partly because we have known each other a while. And when a project is in rewrites, the game changes a bit, because the writer is looking for some specific editorial assistance. Nevertheless, the above are the components of a healthy discussion for work that is in a stage of evolving, developing, becoming.

Other methods of critique:

Dramaturge's Roundtable Process (with thanks to Henry Murray)

This type of critique is very valuable, but again, this one takes a great deal of time; it is best to be used in a group of three or four, and only after a first draft has been created. Thus, this is a rewrite tool. Note that though it is different from the Lerman or RW process, it also is focused on the author's *intent*.

Using this method, the entire group reads the complete draft on their own, before the feedback session. Then, at the session, a group leader poses this question to the author: What is the STORY you are telling?

The author then relates the story as he/she sees it. Note: This is story, not character, not situation.

After this, the group leader asks each member of the group: Is this the story you heard? And if not, how does the story you perceived differ from the author's?

Next, the group leader poses this question to the author:

What is the MEANING/THEME of the piece?

The author then relates the theme or message of the piece as he/she sees it. Note: This is theme/meaning/message—not story!

After this, the group leader asks each member of the group: Is this the meaning/theme you got from the piece? If not, what meaning did you gather from it?

Approximately one hour is allotted to each author in this method.

Guided Questions

This type of critique is also a rewrite technique—though it could be adapted for feedback on brand new pages. In this critique, the author prepares three or four specific questions about the work he/she is presenting. Immediately after the work is presented, the author then asks the questions. The discussion is supposed to stick to the questions posed by the author, rather than stray off to topics about what the reader/audience wants to see.

The author may pose questions about character, story, language, etc. This type of critique session works best for authors who are in the latter stages of revisions and have concerns about some specific areas of the manuscript. It also serves to keep responders on track and not pursuing their own agendas. Some disadvantages of this methods are: The author may not really have a good notion of what questions to pose; the author may be avoiding asking questions about a troublesome area of the writing—and thus avoid having to rewrite; the responders may have information that is helpful, but the questions have restricted them from providing it.

NO MATTER WHAT THE CRITIQUE METHOD:

Focus on the author's intent. What is the author trying to do here? What is the author's intended tone? intended story? intended outcome? How can we help the author achieve what he/she intended to write? You don't have to like the genre, or like the characters, or like the style. Just consider: Is this what the author INTENDED?