

Guidelines for Critique

Format

- I judge quality over quantity, but in general it's hard to do these right in under one single-spaced page (critiques may be single-spaced).
- Turn in one copy on WebCampus and email the other to the author at the same time. I will check over critiques and offer feedback for the first portion of the semester. After a while I will simply glance over them to make sure they're being done.

Content

Each critique for this class will consist of three different parts:

1. A **reading**, in which you provide an *interpretation* of the work at hand. Summarize (briefly!) plot, point of view, setting, etc.—and then, more importantly, go on to provide your interpretation of what you think the story communicates at its thematic / symbolic levels. In other, other words: write down both what the story is about, and what it is About--in addition to the story's surface, think also about what the story might be saying about larger philosophical questions and concerns.

Do this, of course, after reading the Artist's Statement turned in along with the story. Your reading may or may not perfectly align with the author's intentions; acknowledge those intentions, but feel free to lay out thematic readings that might be invisible to the author.

Remember: Authors need to see what a group of attentive readers finds under the surface of a piece of fiction. In order to write well, authors must seek to have as deep/complex an understanding of their work as they can, and here in workshop we can provide feedback on that understanding, even if workshop members read a story differently than an author intends it to be read.

Of course any work of fiction is going to have a great deal going on under the surface. Do your best to mention everything you can; the story's author will be deeply curious to see whether the story can be unpacked in a way he/she intends.

You might also conceptualize this section as follows: Here, you're making an educated guess as to the author's **ambition** for the story—in other words, you can attempt to tell the author what you, as an objective reader, think their highest hopes for the story were. *Regardless of execution in this particular draft, what would the ideal version of this story accomplish/what complicated questions would it ask?*

It's worth remembering a quote from Chekhov: "The writer of fiction should not try to solve such questions as those of God, pessimism, and so forth. [What is] obligatory for the artist [is not] solving a problem . . . but stating a problem correctly." In those terms, use this section of your critique to note what big questions/problems the story in front of you is trying to engage.

2. A section of **praise**, in which you discuss the story's strengths. What did you enjoy? What did you find artful / poetic / literary / suspenseful, etc.? Were the characters finely drawn? Was point of view employed skillfully? Is the story told at the proper and most effective psychic distance? If it is experimental, do its various deviations from tradition pay off, and in what ways? Etcetera.

Always frame this section in terms of your reading in part I: What drew you to your best and most complex understanding of the story's ambition—both as you understand it and as the author intends? How and where does the story hew closest to that ideal--and to the author's own stated intentions?

In other words, thinking of Chekhov: how did the author most successfully pose the story's questions?

3. A section full of **questions to the author** and **suggestions for revision**, in which you discuss elements of the story that might stand to be re-examined. In what ways--related to craft or theme or structure--does the story work against its own best reading, and/or the author's intentions? (But always remember to first apply the **rule of the High Road**: Is what you're reading as a mistake something the author might have done on purpose? Does it achieve an effect you may be resisting? Why?) And again, frame your questions in terms of the reading: What might the author do to bring the story as close as possible to its ambitions? What separates the story from its ideal? In Artist's Statements, class authors will be asking us to look closely at specific concerns, too--make sure this section addresses them (though we are not bound only to those concerns).

You might approach this question in terms of questions to the author. If something is unclear to you, you might simply ask what the author's intention was. That might end up being a question we can bring up in class the next day. It's possible the author has a good reason they can explain to us, and we can all examine the story together.

If the story, then, doesn't seem to be framing its questions properly, what changes could you suggest to rectify this?

Two points to remember:

1) Good criticism is a luxury. Give it and receive it with grace and respect. If you care about your writing, you will recognize that occasions to receive strong, honest critique happen only rarely in life.

Coake: Critique Guidelines

2) The Golden Rule applies here: Write for others the in-depth, useful critique you would want to receive for a work of your own.

Artist's Statement for (title of piece)

By

Name:

Content warnings for story:

Why I wrote this story:

(What led you to write this? You can be as personal--or impersonal--as you'd like, but let us know what drew you to this work, and what sorts of ideas or questions you thought about as you wrote it? What other writers/works were you thinking of when you were drafting this?)

Does the class need to know any specialized information to best understand it?:

(If the story is part of a novel, what do we need to know about the full scope of the story? What happened before these chapters? What happens after them? Don't be afraid to spoil the ending of the novel for us, if you know it—that will help us in our critiques.)

(Otherwise: does the submission require us to know about a particular cultural tradition/experience, or folktale, or approach to storytelling? Does the submission retell or interact specifically with another published story/piece of literature? Is the submission adhering strictly to generic tropes? Etc. You don't have to explain in depth, but you could offer enough direction to guide an interested reader to learn more. It's also okay to say that you don't want to or need to offer direction--if you only want us to interact with what's on the page, we will.)

What I would like to protect in the story, if anything:

Up to three concerns I have about the story going in to workshop: