

Peer Review Strategies

Peer review is a vital component of workshop activity. Here are some guidelines we can use in our responses.

1. Remember that we are critiquing texts, not people or ideologies. When we speak about a text, let's say "the speaker, the protagonist, antagonist, narrator," or "character," even if we are writing about ourselves or our family. We can even refer to the character by name, as if they are some third party we are talking about.
2. Remember we are critiquing texts, not people or ideologies -- again. We may disagree with content, style, language, or subject; treat these objectively, as a researcher or scientist would do when he or she is trying to understand a new discovery, different point of view, or a new or different culture. Also, disliking some part of the text does not mean you also dislike the author!
3. PRAISE! Everyone likes to know when something is going well, and it's important to know what people think work, so that you can understand when things aren't working. Always find something that is working, and always be sure to mark a star, happy face, etc., where you see something working. A note explaining why it works for you is incredibly valuable, too!
4. Phrase criticism as a Question. Rather than say "You should do this..." or "I would do this...", ask open-ended questions (that can't be yes or no answers) like some of the following:
 - a. "What would happen if [character] did [action]...?"
 - b. "Why did [character] do [action]...?"
 - c. "How would [some action or change in the order of content] change your story?"
 - d. "What if you moved [some paragraph or story segment] to [some other location in the work]?"
 - e. "Why did this happen at [this time or place]?"
 - f. "How can you make this idea clearer?"
 - g. "What additional description could you add to make this more real?"
 - h. "Is there dialogue that could make this more real?"
 - i. "Why was this [event, object, person, place] important [to some character]?"
 - j. "How does this story help advance your purpose?"
 - k. "Why is the complete 'truth' necessary here?"
 - l. "How could this idea be presented to maximize the central emotion?"

You should adopt and adapt questions to suit your needs, or come up with your own new questions altogether!

Remember, there are an infinite number of ways to respond – the important thing is to be affirming of what you perceive to be good, gently critical of what doesn't seem to work for you, and above all, honest in your suggestions for change. But more than anything, remember that this is your work – everything we offer and ask is an opinion... take only what you want, and cancel any time!