

Tips for receiving critiques

By Joni Sensel, author of *Reality Leak* (April 2007 from Henry Holt)

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- A critique is just one person's opinion. It may be a very educated, authoritative opinion (e.g., an editor, agent, writing instructor, or published writer), but it's still colored by taste, personal preferences, personal background and history, and how bad a day the person may have had. That's why two editors can disagree about the same piece, and why bestsellers often get rejected repeatedly before they are published.
- That said, when *more* than one person indicates a problem, whether with a passage or larger issues such as characterization, there probably *is* a problem.
- If you only want to hear how great your work is (and we all long to hear that), get feedback from someone who loves you instead. Professionals and other writers asked to critique will generally find something to improve, no matter how good the work is already. That's their job. But good work can often be made incrementally better, and that's what moves you closer to publication.
- Don't be surprised by contradictory feedback. It may just be personal opinion. It may also be that something is wrong, but neither reader could quite put a finger on the cause. Get more feedback on that area specifically.
- Problems raised in critiques may not always be precisely as described, or solved by steps a reviewer suggests, but something is stopping and/or troubling them. (For instance: People tend to get more niggly about word choices and details like that when they're not fully engaged with the characters, the pace is too slow, or credibility is lacking. Similarly, a critique group can suggest a change and then, once they see the rewrite, suggest you change it back. That's usually an indicator of a more elusive problem.) Figure out what the real problem is (by getting more feedback if necessary) and address it.
- Pay most attention to *what* needs fixing. *How* to fix is up to you, and most editors and agents recognize that and will expect you to come up with the solution. (After all, it's your work.)
- If part or all of the critique is verbal, take notes or, better yet, have someone else do that for you. It's easy to obsess about specific feedback or get defensive and miss everything that follows. It's also easy to hear only the negatives; most of us tend to tune out the positives, but that's important information too. Writing things down helps ensure you can look it over later, once you've recovered, for useful guidance and to feel good about what does work.

- If you can, ask clarifying questions. “Specifically what lines made you feel that way? Why do you say that? Where did I lose you?” This can both help illuminate what the real problem is and where to start with improvements.
- Let it sink in for a while — days, weeks if necessary. It’s natural to be defensive or feel wounded at first, especially when you’re just starting, but after the emotional impact passes it becomes easier to objectively consider feedback.
- Pay most attention to feedback that, after a cooling-off period, rings true to you — or that you’re hearing repeatedly.
- You are not obligated to accept or agree with any feedback you receive. You can completely ruin a project by trying to incorporate every single bit of feedback, including comments that contradict. Unobjectionable mediocrity is *not* the goal. Carefully consider feedback that hits your own nagging doubts and that you receive from more than one person. It’s okay to reject the rest. But remember that the more bulletproof you can make your work, the stronger it will be.
- Some people give better feedback or deliver it more tactfully than others, but anyone giving you a critique is trying to help you make your work better. They’re doing you a favor. You are free to ignore or reject the feedback (at your own risk), but always appreciate their time, effort, and intention.