

General Critique Guidelines

For our Critique Houses, we generally follow models by [Mary Robinette Kowal](#) and [Writing Excuses](#). Here are our Critique Houses general critique guidelines:

1. Read first. Comment later.

- Effective critique *usually* happens when you read the work in its entirety a first time; *no* commenting, *no* responding, *no* immediate comments/suggestions.
- The goal is to make sure you read it thoroughly one time, approaching the writing from a “big picture” perspective, rather than start hacking at the work before you consider what the writer is actually saying (or trying to say).

2. Make suggestions, not demands.

- The goal of critique is to help make the writing clearer and more concise while maintaining (at least or elevating at best) the writer’s own unique writing style.
- Observe the writing from the approach of a reader and a writer, *not a grader or reviewer or agent or editor or...*; do not make *demands* of the writer. Suggest! It’s about clarifying their ideas and helping push that development.

3. Ask questions; stick to the point.

- You want to raise valid points through meaningful questions that maybe the writer hadn’t considered. It’s always good practice to ask questions to help guide the writer to areas or moments that could be fixed for clarity, ambiguities, lack of elaboration, more information, better explanations of quotes, etc.
- However, don’t let your scope of feedback creep past the point of helpfulness. More feedback is not always better feedback. Stick to what is necessary now.

4. Always reflect on your feedback.

- As you’re writing your feedback, constantly ask yourself if you’d say the same thing to your best friend on their worst day. Feedback is meant to uplift and empower the writer, so they can see their strengths and feel motivated to keep improving.
- A good rule of thumb is to reread your comments/suggestions and rephrase whenever possible to stray away from absolutes. Use language like “*i feel*” and “*i think*.” Lean on “*maybe*” and “*might*.”

5. Take feedback well.

- Assume positive intent. The feedback-giver is trying to improve your writing. They want to help just as much as you want to help them.
- Don’t try to argue or explain your writing. If a feedback-giver doesn’t see it in your writing, neither will an average reader. Think about how to get that information across.
- Ask clarifying questions. Feedback is best as a dialogue, where both parties invest in creating the best piece of writing they can, and most critique partners will be happy to clarify what they feel.

Three Plus One Feedback Template

Instructions: Read your critique partner's draft and complete this template to provide detailed feedback to them. This template is inspired by [Kathleen Dalton Woodbury's](#) guest appearance on the Writing Excuses Podcast, where she discusses training critique groups. To get started, make a copy of this document.

Part 1: Reading & Highlighting

Read their draft and highlight/[comment](#) on the following:

- ☐ Miscellaneous notes
- ☐ Silly asides and references

Part 2: Identifying & Commenting

1. Places you had a hard time believing the story - "Oh yeah?"
2. Places you didn't understand what the story was saying - "Huh?"
3. Places where you weren't sure why you were supposed to care - "So what?"
4. Places you thought worked well - "That's cool!"

Symptoms-Based Feedback Template

Instructions: Read your critique partner's draft and complete this template to provide detailed feedback to them. This template is inspired from [Mary Robinette Kowal's manuscript critique guidelines](#). According to Kowal, critique is like a clinical trial. Good feedback allows you to hack into your reader's mind when it focuses on their symptoms—their reactions. To get started, make a copy of this document.

Part 1: Reading & Highlighting

Read their draft and highlight/[comment](#) based on the following symptoms:

- ☐ [Awesome](#) - How did the coolest parts make you feel?
- ☐ [Relatable](#) - Which parts did you relate to the characters in?
- ☐ [Anticipation](#) - When did you find yourself trying to guess what would happen next?
- ☐ [Bored](#) - Where did you find yourself skimming the story?
- ☐ [Confused](#) - Which sections did you have to re-read to understand?
- ☐ [Disbelief](#) - Where did the story seem too unbelievable?

Part 2: Answer Questions

After you've read and highlighted/commented on the draft, answer the following sets of questions as fully as you can:

1. Why were those sections awesome? Why did you respond this way to these sections? What elements make these sections awesome?
2. Why did you relate to those characters? What about those characters or those situations made them relatable?
3. Why did you find yourself anticipating what comes next? What about these sections made you want to guess what happens next? If you did make guesses, what were those guesses, and what made you think that was coming next?
4. Why were those sections boring? Why did you respond this way to these sections? What elements make these sections boring?
5. Why were you confused in those sections? Why did you respond this way to these sections? What elements make these sections confusing?
6. Why did your [suspension of disbelief](#) break in those sections? Why did you respond this way to these sections? What elements make these sections unbelievable?

Close Reading Feedback Template

Instructions: Read your critique partner's draft and complete this template to provide detailed feedback to them. This template is inspired by literary and media "close reading" techniques. To get started, make a copy of this document.

Part 1: Initial Observations

Read their draft and highlight/comment on the following:

- ☐ Contrasts (i.e., black v white, good v bad, beginning v end, villain v hero, life v death)
- ☐ Anomalies (i.e., what doesn't seem to belong or what might be missing that you expected to be there)
- ☐ Moments of intensity (what stands out, what calls your attention the most, where is the text asking you to focus the most, what's the climax, what's the surprise or twist)

Part 2: Answer Questions

After you've read and highlighted/commented on the draft, answer the following sets of questions as fully as you can:

1. Summarize what happens in 1-2 sentences. What is the most important plot point?
2. What is your first response to the text--is it fun or boring, bright or dull, interesting descriptively, grounded in sensory details, etc.? Why was this your first response, and why does it matter to you as a reader?
3. What specific people, objects, and activities show up? How do they interact? Why are those people and those objects and those activities present, and why does it matter to you as a reader?
4. What specific contrasts are present in the text? Why are certain juxtapositions being used, and why does it matter to you as a reader?
5. What specific anomalies do you see in the text? Why do these elements not seem to belong, and why does it matter to you as a reader?
6. What are the specific moments of intensity in the text? Why are these intense moments for you, and why does it matter to you as a reader?

Modified House GlockCroc Feedback Template

Instructions: Read your critique partner's draft and complete this template to provide detailed feedback to them. This template was adapted from a template developed and successfully used by House GlockCroc, one of our Critique Houses. To get started, make a copy of this document.

Part 1: Reading & Highlighting

Read their draft and highlight/comment on the following:

- ☐ Sections that you enjoyed as a reader
- ☐ Sections where you got stuck as a reader (e.g., you got confused, don't know why you're supposed to care, don't believe what you're reading...)
- ☐ Miscellaneous notes, silly asides, references, etc., that brought you joy

Part 2: Answer Questions

After you've read and highlighted/commented on the draft, answer the following questions:

- ☐ **OVERALL FEEDBACK —**
 - 1. How would you describe the general vibes?
 - 2. What were 2-3 specific 'ooh' moments for you, and why did it feel that way for you?
- ☐ **AT THE END, I WANTED —**
 - 3. What about the story did you want to know more about and why?
 - 4. What about the story did you want to know less about and why?
 - 5. How are the main characters portrayed (e.g., what are some assumptions you have about the characters)?
 - 6. How do you think the narrative will develop (e.g., what are some assumptions you have about the plot)?
 - 7. Would you keep reading, and why?
- ☐ **AS A READER —**
 - 8. How did specific parts of the story make you feel?
 - 9. Which parts did you enjoy the most? What made them enjoyable for you?
 - 10. Which places pushed you out of the story and why?
- ☐ **AS A WRITER —**
 - 11. What are some writing-side observations (e.g., "there were a lot of em-dashes, and it lessened the impact for me)?
 - 12. What are one or two specific things the author can focus on improving?
 - 13. Where are some places in the story where the author did a great job?
 - 14. What questions do you have for the author?