

CRITIQUE GUIDELINES

The following guidelines are modified from those published by Richard Hamper (c. 1995).

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GENERAL

- 1 *This isn't a test.* You don't need to answer every question, and there is no score. These are just guidelines to help you think in a structured way about important aspects of the novel.
- 2 *Choose your own format for the critique.* If you can tie a criticism back to a specific page, paragraph, or example, this will help the author.
- 3 *Ignore diplomacy.* I have a thick skin. From the author's perspective, the most important thing is to get clear views and reactions from critics. This helps improve the end product (the published novel).
- 4 *Use specifics where possible, rather than generalities.* I can fix specifics, but generalities are much more difficult to address.
- 5 *Suggestions are good.* I may not accept every suggestion, but I guarantee I will consider them.
- 6 *Consider the sandwich approach.* Start with some positive impressions of the author's work; follow-up with negative criticism; and finish with more positive comments on the author's work. Then, go back and spice the negative "meat" of the sandwich with positive feedback on anything that struck you as really nifty aspects of the author's story or technique. This starts the critique off on a good note, helps maintain a balance, and ends the critique on an upbeat note. Most authors appreciate this approach.
- 7 *Acknowledgements.* In the front matter of the book, I'd like to acknowledge the contribution of other people to improvements. I'll need your written permission in order to do that.

CRITICAL MEAT – *Give your overall impressions of the author's work.*

- 8 In general, did the story or excerpt work for you? What specifically didn't work?
- 9 Did you enjoy the story? Do you want to read more?
- 10 If you're reviewing a novel excerpt, summarize for the author what you expect the story to deliver in the way of mysteries solved, conflicts resolved, characters changed, etc. This will let the author know if he or she has set the reader's expectations appropriately.
- 11 Comment on the story's opening (unless you're critiquing an excerpt).
- 12 From reading the opening, were you clear on the direction of the story?
- 13 Did it hook you into wanting to read more?

PLOT AND STORY LINE

The 'plot' has to do with the sequence of events and actions. The 'story' has to do with the emotional journey of the characters.

- 14 How does the author's plot strike you? Did you like it? If not, why not?
- 15 What did you think about the emotional journey of the characters? (the 'story')
- 16 Did you feel there was some "point" to the story (i.e., did you get the impression that some protagonist tried to accomplish something)? Or was the writing aimless?
- 17 Was the plot believable? Were you able to suspend disbelief, or did some exasperating detail make you want to toss the story across the room? If so, what was that detail?

ENDING—*Comment on the story's ending (unless you're critiquing an excerpt).*

- 18 *Was it too abrupt or too rushed?*
- 19 *Did it resolve all the conflicts it should have?*
- 20 *Was it satisfying?*

CHARACTERS AND CHARACTERIZATION

- 21 *Were you able to easily identify the protagonist?*
- 22 *Was the antagonist a worthy opponent?*
- 23 *Did any characters stand out as "cardboardy" or flat?*
- 24 *Were the characters believable?*
- 25 *Did you find yourself caring about what happens to the main or other characters?*

DIALOG AND DIALECTS

- 26 *Were you comfortable with the dialogue? What bothered you about it?*
- 27 *Was dialect used? Did the dialect work or was it too much?*
- 28 *Did the dialogue drag?*
- 29 *Were there too many "he said"/ "she said" speech tags?*
- 30 *Did each character have a distinctive voice? Which characters didn't?*
- 31 *Does the author use "said-bookisms"? (Said-bookism are potentially needless, literary, or ridiculous substitutes for the nearly invisible "he said," or "she said" speech tags--e.g., he spit out, she shouted, he interjected, he cried, she commiserated, etc.)*

STORY SETTING

- 32 *Was the length of descriptive passages too much, too little, or just right?*
- 33 *Did the author give enough detail, too much detail, or too little detail about places and events?*
- 34 *Did the descriptive passages set and enhance the appropriate mood?*
- 35 *Did the places seem real to you?*

FLOW AND PACING

- 36 *Was the pacing too intense? Too slow?*
- 37 *Was the paragraphing handled effectively? Long paragraphs slow the tempo down. Short paragraphs speed it up.*

POINT OF VIEW (POV)

- 38 *Identify for the author paragraphs where more than one POV is present. If they aren't using a third-person omniscient POV, these paragraphs will need fixing.*
- 39 *Identify for the author where he or she jumped from one character's POV to describing only what can be seen from the author's POV (e.g., a description of a character's physical characteristics that the character is not likely to be able to make in the circumstances portrayed).*

INFORMATION DUMPS

- 40 *How well does the author handle disseminating information to the reader that's critical to understanding what's happening in the story? Did the author handle this unobtrusively?*
- 41 *Are there too many flashbacks?*
- 42 *Is too much internalization used?*
- 43 *Are long boring passages of exposition used?*
- 44 *Does the imparting of this information disrupt or inappropriately slow down the flow of the story?*

ACCURACY

- 45 *Are the "facts" of the story correct or feasible? Does the science match what you know? Are the duels and fights believable? Is the geography accurate? Is the clothing described consistent with the time period portrayed?*

CONSISTENCY

- 46 *Is the author consistent throughout the story in the handling of story details? For example, are the character's eyes the same color in Chapter 1 as they are in Chapter 12? Does a character have a different number of children in the first scene compared to a middle scene, and there's no accounting for the difference? Is the chronology handled correctly?*

WORDINESS

- 47 *Except for dialog, where it may be part of a character's 'voice,' look for unneeded words. (For instance, "and", "by", fuzzy adverbs, "is", "of", "there", etc. These often flag verboseness.)*
- 48 *Except for dialog, where it may be part of a character's 'voice,' look for "fluff" phrases like "as a matter of fact", "at this point in time", etc. These can usually be replaced by one or two words.*
- 49 *Does the author use too much passive voice?*
- 50 *Look for redundancies (e.g., "final completion", "respectful regard", etc.)*
- 51 *Look for redundant sentences or phrases (e.g., two sentences or phrases that say the same thing in different words).*
- 52 *Except for dialog, look for unnecessary qualifiers (e.g., "almost", "seem", "sort of", "maybe", etc.).*

DETRACTIONS AND CONFUSIONS

- 53 *Were there factors that detract from the story being a success? For instance, was there anything you found confusing in the story?*

AVOID CRITIQUING GRAMMAR AND PUNCTUATION

- 54 *Stay away from detailed critiquing of grammar and punctuation unless the author specifically requests such a review. Only comment on recurring errors where you're sure of your ground, and it's apparent that the writer has a major problem.*

REFERENCES TO HELP WITH YOUR CRITIQUING:

Brohaugh, William. **WRITE TIGHT: HOW TO KEEP YOUR PROSE SHARP, FOCUSED, AND CONCISE.** Naperville, IL: Sourcebooks, Inc., 2007. ISBN: 978-1402210518.

Browne, Renni and King, Dave. **SELF-EDITING FOR FICTION WRITERS: HOW TO EDIT YOURSELF INTO PRINT.** Second Edition. New York: HarperCollins, 2017. ISBN: 978-0060545697.

Strunk, William and White, E. B. **THE ELEMENTS OF STYLE.** Fourth Edition. San Luis Obispo, CA. Spectrum Ink Publishing., 2017. ISBN: 978-1-988236-51-3.