

# HOW TO BE A GOOD CRITIQUE PARTNER

Employ these best practices when you don an editorial cap.

BY ANICA MROSE RISSI

**T**hinking critically and deeply about another writer's work-in-progress and articulating feedback not only benefits the other writer – it also develops your revision skills and helps you better understand your own writing process. Whether you do a manuscript swap or agree to read someone else's work without reciprocation, it can be a win-win experience. But critique-partner relationships involve real vulnerability on the part of both the writer whose draft is to be dissected and the person wielding the scalpel. That vulnerability can lead to great insights and revisions...and great hurt. Before you dive metaphor-first into a critique of a friend or acquaintance's draft, pause and ask that other writer – and yourself – a few basic questions, and take note of these strategies and approaches that will improve how the feedback is delivered *and* received.

## Be discerning about what you sign on to read

An ideal editor or critique partner understands what the best version of a project might be and asks questions and gives feedback that will help the writer get it there. But the wrong critique partner, however smart or well-intentioned, can be frustratingly unhelpful or even cause the writer damage.

Before you agree to read someone else's work in progress, ask yourself if you:

1. Respect the person and her work
2. Like and respect the kind of project she's writing
3. Truly want to read the draft.

If the answer to any of those is "Well, not exactly," say no.

If you don't usually enjoy the other person's writing, or don't care for the category or genre in which she's working, you are not the right person to read her draft, and you wouldn't be doing her any favors by forcing yourself through the exercise. "I'm flattered to be asked, but I don't think I'd be the best reader for this one," or "Sorry, but there's too much else on my plate right now," or simply "Nope! Can't," are all legitimate ways to decline a request for critique.

Saying no might feel bad in the moment, but it will be better for you both in the long run.



### Ask questions first

Before you read a single word, ask the writer what stage of development she believes her work to be in and what kind of feedback she's hoping for. Is she sharing the early start of an idea, for which she mainly wants encouragement or someone with whom to brainstorm? Is this a rough first draft for which she'd like honest feedback on a specific plot-line or character? Or is it a finely cut gem she's hoping you'll help polish – but is open to smashing and reassembling? Her answer will tell you a lot about what kind of critique will be most useful and how much criticism she's open to at that stage. Respect those boundaries while also being honest.

If you've got something to say, say it – nicely and professionally, but without apology or too many layers of cushioning.

Similarly, if you start reading a draft and find it isn't ready yet for thorough, detailed feedback, give yourself permission to step back, read faster, and comment more generally. Don't waste your time on premature in-depth editorial notes that will only overwhelm the writer – and possibly strain your relationship.

### React with your head, heart, and pen (or comment button)

A huge part of your job as critique partner is to help the writer answer a crucial question, which even the most talented author cannot answer alone: *What is the experience of reading this like for someone who did not write it?*

It's a generous gift for a critique partner to give reactions – from a smiley face or heart in the margins to a more detailed note or question that lets the writer know what a reader might be thinking, feeling, wondering, chuckling over, confused by, reminded of, or excited about as she goes along. Don't be afraid to treat the draft like a conversation, and interject your responses as you read.

### Don't hold back on the compliments

Yes, a spoonful of sugar helps the other, less-positive comments go down. But it also lets the writer know what's working well in her manuscript, and

that's important feedback to have. It can be just as valuable for the writer to hear what a draft's strengths are as it is to hear where there's room for improvement. The more specific you can be with your positive feedback, the more useful it will be for helping her structure her revision around fixing the draft's weakness while building on its strengths.

### Be kind but straightforward

When it comes to the draft's shortcomings: If you've got something to say, say it – nicely and professionally, but without apology or too many layers of cushioning. Don't force the writer to read between the lines or go through miles of loop-dee-loops to get at what you're trying to tell her. Keep your criticism honest, warm, respectful, and direct. (And deliver it in writing, rather than in person, so the writer isn't forced to react in front of you. Even a mild critique of one's creative work can sting sharply on landing. Give her time and space to get over that in private, and any back-and-forth that follows will be far more productive and less charged.)

### Remember, it's not your work

One of the most common pitfalls of the novice editor or critique partner is to push the writer toward revisions that don't fit what *she* wants the work to be. Although you will be identifying problems and even suggesting possible solutions the writer might incorporate to strengthen her draft, it is not your job to fix it – nor, more importantly, is the goal for it to become the manuscript *you* would write. (Though, of course, thinking critically about what you would do differently if it were your work is one significant way being a good critique partner can make you a better writer.)

Similarly, the goal of your feedback is not to help the draft become the best book (or essay or short story) ever. You're trying to help it become the best version of *itself* it can be.

In a good critique, the writer's goals and vision for the project take precedence. To do your job well, you need to identify and understand what the writer is hoping to achieve.

Ask yourself these questions as you read: What is this piece of writing (and/or this chapter, scene, paragraph, or sentence) trying to accomplish? In what ways does it succeed? In what ways does it fall short? In what ways could it be pushed further? How might it need to pull back to be most effective?

Keeping those questions and their answers actively in mind as you evaluate the work will make your comments, questions, and suggestions on-point, and therefore more valuable to the writer. 📖

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Anica Mrose Rissi is the author of the Anna, Banana chapter-book series; the picture books *Watch Out for Wolf!* and *The Teacher's Pet*; and a young adult novel, *Always Forever Maybe*. Follow her on Twitter and Instagram at @anicarissi.