

Sample Workshop Critiques

Critique Example 1

Critique by Paul Kraus

I like Adbusters and was really nervous how one may imitate its content without being ridiculous. You handled the social critic role nicely by offering us readers a succinct, humble, heartfelt, and healthily perceived story. We get enough of the narrator by his occupation (twisting the pine needle); by his viewpoint (looking over relative's shoulders at the yellow H2); some inner thoughts with nicely settled flashback (hate opening gifts); and the dialogue (particularly the last line).

I'm glad that I don't have much to offer as advice. It's a tight little story. There are a few instances where you might reconsider word choices to make the work pop with maturity (I'm not particularly satisfied with the portion of the line that reads: "maintain their equilibrium under the mountain" which actually standing alone reads really poetically; however, I don't like the word choice "under" in the larger sentence but that's only me). Also maybe up for reconsideration: "behind a wall of red ribbons and Santa Claus wrapping paper." Because I think the writer thinks about Christmas excesses, I'd like to see this sort of a description bounce with excessive description or at least be taut-the word "wall" here I think is vague and weak. I don't quite get the layer of skin shedding idea. I think the abstraction is out of place as the story is written. If you cut it out the work will not suffer the loss of any advantages supposedly gained by its presence.

That's all. I've made a few notes about spelling errors but I am sure so has everyone else. I'm not sure how to make this story any better other than by being a little more selective in your words and expressions. It's a good piece as it now stands. Thanks for sharing.

This is a critique written for WRT 360, about a magazine article for Adbusters. It's an example of a piece that the critic really liked, to the point of having very little negative feedback to give. Although the critic was a fan, he still provided specific comments/advice, which is very helpful for a writer who will consider the critique.

Critique Example 2

Critique by Erika Lynds

I liked the irony of this story and that Nick was finally exposed for the schmuck that he was at the end. A reader could definitely tell that he was a jerk, even though he thought he was a "good person." It was interesting that we could gather this even through his eyes, and our suspicions were more than confirmed at the end with all the extra info that Jen observed. My biggest complaint about this story would probably be that you tell us a lot of information, rather than show us. You can do a lot with the actions and body language of characters to give us a sense of their mindset without having to tell us exactly what they're thinking. I definitely would've liked to see more of that.

Also, I think it would be worthwhile to try to find a way to make Nick's observations flow a little better. As it is, it feels choppy. Almost as if you could bullet point the list of people he saw. I think the fact that you say things like,

Here's an opposite case: this critique is quite critical, but doesn't get nasty or browbeat the author. The critic started with positive feedback, then identified specific problems and suggested solutions, and then mentioned unanswered questions that had distracted her from the piece. Finishing up with a bit more positive feedback at the end would have provided a little more sugar to make the medicine go down, but this critique is clear and thorough.

“That was Nick’s first noteworthy observation,” give the story this feel. It might be better to just let him walk through the carnival and let us watch him, rather than stating that each person was a subject for his paper.

There are also a few details that seem fuzzy. How old are these characters? Seniors? And how old is Nick’s sister that she would be just heading out to a spa with her friends? I don’t think a high-schooler could afford that, especially when there is only one parent to provide money for stuff like that. And Tina definitely came out of the blue. It might be more believable if they had had some interaction over the last two years. Some of those details could be cleaned up or just omitted and it would make your story flow a lot better.

Critique Example 3

Critique by Chris Bekofske

I can see why you want to expand upon this. You did a great job setting up the back-story and adding character to Shada and Finn. There’s a lot of detail here which would strengthen a longer work, and I really liked reading these parts—the vibrant selection of goods in Koko’s shop, the crowded bar scene, the dream scenes, and Shada walking home and watching the sunset. I want to know and see more, so I can definitely understand why you’d want to keep going with this.

Personally I didn’t think it felt too rushed by comparison, but if it were expanded into a longer work this piece could easily become the first two chapters/sections/what have you. The bar scene should probably be expanded to be more dominant in a longer version, with more about Shada and Finn’s first meeting and more of their dialogue. The dream sequence would make a perfect start for the second section.

Speaking of which, you wanted suggestions on how to expand it. My suggestion would be to place it in the present tense before she wakes up, and make the reader experience as much of it as possible—a pelican flying, falling, and crawling through an empty desert; the feeling of her lungs filling with water and fish staring dull-eyed back into her now-dulling eyes and the brightness and grandeur of the jewel that erupts from her. I really like all three, and if you wanted to make them more powerful, I’d say hammer as much of them into the story as possible. I really like dream scenes and I like the pelican and fish ones best since they’re ambiguous yet still have a lot of symbolic connotation. The last one made me think she’d become pregnant (though I guess it could also refer to her singing). If I’m wrong about the pregnancy, ignore me; otherwise, you could do something like “lights and colors emanating from her” or something like that to get the not-pregnant across. Just my suggestions. Good job, and good luck with revisions!

Critique Example 4

Critique by Tom Gunnels

This was a great story. Everyone needs to hear a real modern pirate story, not the bullshit you get from pirates versus ninjas or whatever. I really love the way you incorporate things such as “went down with the ship” in order to make it feel more authentic, even though you guys were marching in a parade, not on a ship. But this is also where I feel you could add more. I think you could add more historic pirate information, comparing yourselves to real pirates that did piratey things.

Also, you included lots of great jargon, but you didn’t incorporate any of it into actual dialogue. I would really love to hear the interactions between all the different pirates, with their “yars” and “nars” and “scalawags.” I think that would really elevate this piece. Because as it stands now, it is a big retelling of a story. I feel as though you were trying to just tell this story that took eight

Here’s a critique of a story that was turned in very unfinished and sprawling—more like a novel in progress. Although this sample does not portray a critique about a completely written piece, the critic found a way to identify many strengths in the unfinished work. He was able to effectively address the author’s question about what/how to expand, without squashing the author’s work early on in the project.

When a group has a good time together, and everyone gets to know one another’s work, the critiques can become quite informal. This isn’t always the case, but it’s fine when and if it happens. Here’s an example of a late-in-the-semester critique between two guys who knew the other would be fine with the humor. This tone isn’t for everyone, and definitely isn’t for the first few workshop sessions in a semester, but it represents a lot of late-semester critiques that have become friendly and joking, but still contain good criticism.

pages, so you cut out a lot of the actual things that make it a written story, not just an oral story. Does that make sense? Things like dialogue and such.

It was a quick read, even though it's half spaced and eight pages. It was a quick read because it was thoroughly interesting and enjoyable, so I would not be afraid to add more. Add the real good stuff, such as the dialogue, jargon, and the stuff you had to leave out for fear of it being too long. Good work!

Critique Example 5

Critique by Jessica DeWent

I really like the voice the author has given the narrator. It's really refreshing in that it is both witty and spunky. I feel like the person telling the story has an attitude, and that they're the type of person with 'street smarts.' The author establishes this right away in the first paragraph, which is good, because it gives the reader a clear idea of how she will deliver the story.

One thing I noticed that the author could consider altering is the number of fairy tale references in the beginning. It is very heavy, and although each reference is smart and creative, they begin to come off as a little forced. I really do like them, and if she decides to keep them all, I would just spread them out a little more so that the reader is not overloaded with them.

Another thing I would suggest is going through and changing some of the word choices. Sometimes the words seem too big for where they are or just out of place, words like 'nefarious' and 'tumultuous.' For some reason I don't get the feeling that our narrator would use those words in her everyday speech.

I really liked a lot of the descriptions that are given to us. There are a lot of vivid details in here that work really well.

Here's an example of a more formal critique written directly to the professor, addressing "the author".