

Reading How You're Read
The Art of Evaluating Criticism
By Ann Pancake
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You're heading home from that writers conference, exhausted and exhilarated, toting a bag loaded with feedback on your short story from fifteen people you didn't even know two weeks ago. Or you're finishing the second workshop of your first year in that MFA program, overwhelmed by the torrent of advice you received on the poem you've been revising for six months. Perhaps you're hunkered over your coffee table in the few minutes you have between your nine-to-five job and this month's writers group meeting, trying to digest the comments on your memoir from the last time you met. No matter what circumstances have led to the blizzard of input—this often contradictory, sometimes intimidating, and occasionally infuriating criticism—the question remains: How do you begin to make sense of it all?

After years of digesting criticism of my own fiction as well as reading and listening to countless commentaries from my students on their peers' work, I've found there are three basic principles that will help you master the art of evaluating feedback on your writing.

READING YOURSELF

With your poem, short story, essay, or book manuscript back in your hands, the first thing you'll probably do is scan the feedback as quickly as possible with the secret hope that your critics have deemed the piece perfect. But once you see this is not the case—and before you can productively sort through the comments—you have to perform a balancing act that may be the most difficult step of the evaluation process. You must suspend enough of your ego to become somewhat objective while holding on to enough of it so that you don't sacrifice your vision.

The easiest way to reach that semiobjective zone is simply to wait. For many of us, our immediate reaction to feedback can be defensiveness—and even anger, hurt, and ultimately defeat. Let those feelings pass before reading the criticism carefully. For me, this usually takes about a day, although when I was younger and less experienced, it took longer. If you can figure out your own schedule around this issue, you can save yourself a lot of the emotional agony and time wasted by wrestling with criticism too early. Let the critique cool. Only when you feel your mind and heart creaking back open should you give the commentary a careful read.

At the same time, remember that humility and openness to the ideas of others isn't the final endpoint in this process. Some writers—especially beginning writers who receive feedback from authoritative critics—quickly abandon their vision of the piece, and it immediately ceases to be their own. When this happens, the work almost always fails. Achieving the balance between receptivity to others and faith in one's self takes practice and experience, and as your sense of yourself as a writer solidifies, it becomes easier to strike this equilibrium.

READING THE FEEDBACK

When you're finally ready to carefully consider the criticism of your work, you must first ask yourself: What parts of this critique contribute to the ultimate goal of fulfilling my vision for this

work? What parts indicate that the reader either doesn't understand my intent, or understands my intent but wants me to move in a different direction?

Before you can answer these questions, of course, you have to have a fairly strong sense of your vision for the work. This is why it is important to avoid exposing your writing to criticism until you have a solid grasp of what you're trying to achieve. I don't show anyone what I'm working on until I know I can't make it any better by myself, and I usually don't reach this point until I've finished seven or eight drafts. You might ask someone to read your piece early in the writing process for her support, but if you do this, make clear to the reader what you need from her at this stage—it usually isn't criticism. Even the most novice writer must wait until he at least thinks he understands his vision for the piece before he makes it vulnerable to outside criticism. Later, when you feel you have a handle on your work's intent and are ready to seek criticism, remain open to the possibility that you still may not fully understand the piece and that another reader might actually "get" it before you do.

Once you're conscious of your intent, you're ready to evaluate the specific content of the feedback. If more than one reader identifies the same problem, your decision is relatively easy. Take that consistent reaction to heart. Unfortunately, though, you can often find yourself getting conflicting advice about a specific issue—one reader loved it, another hated it or found it confusing. For example, an editor found the way I slowly revealed information in the first hundred pages of my novel a weakness—she felt that if I didn't more immediately make clear what the novel "was about," readers wouldn't continue reading. Three of my other critics, however, actually loved what one called the "hide-and-reveal" nature of the book because of the suspense it built.

When you hear conflicting advice about a single issue, consider the source of the criticism and listen to your gut. Two readers taking notice of the same element of your story in different ways may mean that you're actually doing something right there—something unusual or unexpected. It may also mean that you're simply not making yourself clear, and you're being misread all the way around. Pay special attention to criticism that echoes comments about earlier pieces you've received from different readers. I've always been called on my vague pronoun references, for example, so if that comes up (again) in feedback, I know it's something I need to address.

As a rule of thumb, take seriously the fact that a problem has been identified. Take a little less seriously the ideas your reader offers as solutions. Occasionally such solutions do work, but more often than not someone else's idea for your own piece just isn't quite right. If you can tweak the suggestion in your own way, however, it may very well do the trick. For these reasons, a vague solution can actually be more helpful than a specific one.

But while open-ended solutions might be useful, be wary of ambiguous identifications of potential problems, like "I just couldn't get into the essay" or "I couldn't really sympathize with the main character." These comments often indicate that the reader isn't reading or thinking very carefully, or is thinking about the wrong things. You can sometimes salvage this kind of critique by kindly asking for specifics. A close cousin to the vague response is the canned response—those old chestnuts you hear over and over again in workshops, which usually mean that the reader didn't read closely or that she doesn't have enough workshop experience to know how to

really critique a piece. Whenever I hear "I would like to see more of this character" or "of this scene," for example, two of the most common canned workshop responses, I bristle. If the reader is explaining exactly how a character needs to be developed or is describing precisely how the scene needs to be expanded, "I'd like to see more of..." is helpful. Usually, however, it's just downright lazy feedback.

Occasionally, in more advanced workshops, you'll get something that is the opposite of canned feedback but is no more useful: A reader will make a suggestion that sounds very original and interesting, but, on close inspection, has little to do with your piece, at least as you have written it. (This usually comes from the kind of critic for whom it's more important to look intelligent to others in the workshop than it is to help you improve your writing.)

Be wary of suggestions that make the work "easier" to read. If your critic is addressing something in your story that is obviously unclear, fine, but such suggestions can also be triggered by a passage in your piece where you made an unexpected move, strayed from conventions, or took a risk. While the critic's natural instinct might be to "smooth out" these irregularities, you could end up compromising the originality of your art by following such directives. Another more obvious thing to remember is that if a reader has unequivocally misread one part of your piece, you should probably take less seriously his similar remarks elsewhere.

Keep in mind that a reader who commented on an earlier draft may have a hard time giving an objective, reliable read of a revised version. Unfortunately, that first read usually muddies the second one. As a teacher who must comment on my students' revisions and read commentaries on their peers' revisions, I've noticed this problem time and again. When critics reread, they tend to over-praise changes (especially ones they suggested), grow bored more quickly, and occasionally bemoan the omission of passages or lines they grew attached to in an early draft but that really did need to go.

READING YOUR READERS

As part of evaluating feedback, you also need to evaluate its source. Sizing up an unknown reader in a new workshop or writers group is tricky business, which is why it's so critical to develop and nurture a network of readers you trust. In your workshops and writing groups, seek out thorough readers who understand your vision and aren't set on altering it, and then try to work with them outside that structured context. Offer to trade work with them—always reciprocate—and remember that a thoughtful, caring response to their work is likely to elicit a comparable effort.

Although it might take years to evolve, such a network of readers is invaluable, not just for the purpose of getting criticism of your work, but also as a support system as you suffer the inevitable trials and tribulations of being a writer. Don't despair if you don't have the opportunity to know a variety of people in this way. Even one or two smart, dependable, generous people can provide you with almost everything you need.

When you are confronted with a new reader, weigh a number of factors—including the amount of workshop experience the person has had, the quality and quantity of literature she has read, and what she likes to read and why—to determine how relevant her comments will be to your

work. A particular reader might be an excellent critic of a certain type of writing but not a good critic of yours. At the same time, don't discount the perspective of a smart reader who doesn't share your aesthetic. This kind of critic can be extremely valuable in unexpected ways. For example, my short stories are very language-driven, but precisely because I understand style a lot better than I understand plot, I can learn a lot from good readers who grasp plot better than the intricacies of language.

Pay attention to how the workshop participant responds to the work of others in the class, especially work that shares similarities with yours. Take with a grain of salt not only destructive critics, but also those who praise enthusiastically everything they lay eyes on. And do consider any personal biases a reader might have for or against a particular piece. Such prejudices might concern you as a writer (and have nothing to do with your work), the critic's insecurities about her own work, or the subject matter of the poem, story, or essay being critiqued. I've had readers who identified so closely with a protagonist that they couldn't judge the piece with any degree of objectivity.

My most reliable indication that I need to incorporate a particular piece of feedback occurs when I reread the passage in question and feel a twinge in my stomach. Then I hear that old voice in my head: "Yep, deep down I thought that was a problem all along. But I was just too attached to the beauty or cleverness of my words—or simply too lazy—to fix it. I sure was hoping I'd get away with it, but I guess I didn't."

Above all, as you respond to criticism of your writing, remember that you can't please everyone. If you try to suit all the people, or even all the "important" people who have commented on your work, you could find yourself busily sanding away idiosyncrasies, "normalizing" unconventional portions, and lopping off risky passages—all of which will serve only to homogenize your writing and turn it into (at best) craft instead of art.

The biggest argument against workshops and writing groups is that they can take a diamond in the rough and reduce it to a trinket. Keep in mind that art is not created by consensus.

After you absorb all those outside voices about your story, poem, or novel, try to seed the criticism into your subconscious. Then wait a few days, weeks, or even months. When you reread your work, look carefully for any signs that the criticism you've digested is the criticism for which the piece is asking. The work itself must play the final judge. It will always speak truthfully if you learn how to listen closely enough.

Ann Pancake is the author of the novel *Strange as This Weather Has Been*, forthcoming from Shoemaker & Hoard. She is currently on the faculty of the low-residency MFA program at Pacific Lutheran University in Tacoma, Washington.