

How to Critique without Criticizing

*Giving and Getting Constructive Criticism
in the form of a Critique*

Why critique?

Overall, the point of a critique should be to help someone obtain their best possible outcome.

- Timely intervention while something is worked on will typically be better than a post factum analysis.
- A conversation rather than a lecture is often effective.
- Building a list of actionable items as part of a plan on how to proceed can be a positive outcome even in a sever critique.
- Sincerity and supportiveness can set a good stage for future interactions.

Why does it matter how it is done?

The intent of the critique and the presentation of the critique can be seen as two different things, but the reality is that they are unavoidably interconnected.

What happens if you criticize rather than critique?

- Good suggestions can end up being ignored due to how they are presented.
- Motivation/morale can be decreased, resulting in less overall effort going into something.

Approaches that can be used when giving a critique...

Different situations might call for different approaches.

- A mixture of comments about the strengths and about the weaknesses can help boost confidence as well as point to successes on which to build. You can compliment something in a critique!
- Frame clear problems in a broader context rather than in what could be seen as a personal/judgmental attack. Focus on the situation or issue or project rather than on the person.
- Offer potential ways to fix, or approach fixing, a problem.
- Avoid direct comparisons to other individuals or projects.
- Make it clear where notes are merely opinions, presenting them as alternative ideas to consider rather than edicts to follow.

Who can give a useful critique?

“Anyone” is an overly-vague answer to this, but can be valid in many ways. A domain expert might seem like the most useful source of critiques, but this might not be true, especially with certain types of works and at certain phases of them. A common question that comes up is how much one needs to “know” to be able to offer comments of use to someone else.

Critiques representing the views of someone from a different field can be useful in certain places (like a capstone). Comments that are more “free association” by a person made after seeing something can help the creator see how their creation is going to be perceived by others. In general, an “outsider” might offer a fresh idea for a new approach.

Details matter...

It is important to consider the fact that if the person already knew certain details, they probably would have utilized them.

For example

- If a presentation went on too long, rather than saying “it needs to be shorter” think about how it could have been made shorter without sacrificing content. “For each main point, limit yourself to one or at most two examples. Three or four is too many.”

Receiving the critique

Going into a critique with the right mindset is also important for the person getting the feedback.

- Hopefully, the comments being give are meant to be a source of honest and useful feedback. Don't go in with a view of it being uninvited criticism. Consider the intent. Look for the message.
- Focus on what is being said, rather than how it is being said, in case the person providing the feedback isn't as tactful as desired. There can still be valuable advice or insights in what is being said.
- Avoid being defensive in your responses during the conversation. If you feel a comment is off-target, try to extract more information about it to better understand or to correct a misunderstanding.

Why do we critique?

This might go without saying, but I'll say it anyway.

- We want all students in DCC to further develop their talents and explore their interests, while being able to demonstrate their skills and creativity through their capstone.
- If we didn't care, we wouldn't bother to critique.
- If we say, "this project needs more completed elements" or "your work needs to be more polished and professional-looking" the underlying message is likely "you have a lot of potential and we want to push you to meet it" or "we want you to look your best in front of your peers and others who will be judging you based on the work you present."

Activities

Think about...

- ...compliments you have gotten related to your project or other creative endeavors.
- ...pieces of criticism (constructive or otherwise) you have gotten related to your project or other creative endeavors.
- ...comments you have made, or thoughts you have had, related to someone else's creative endeavor and think about whether they were critiques or criticisms.