

Some notes on critique

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An online version is available at <https://writingwithacamera.com/resources/critique-guide/>

What is critique?

A critique is an oral discussion strategy used to analyze, describe, and interpret works of art and helps us hone our persuasive oral information gathering and justification skills. Critique is a form of community and relationship building and a fundamental component of reflective practice (Schön 1984). Experience alone does not necessarily lead to learning, deliberate analysis and reflection on experience is essential in order to improve the way we work. The classroom becomes a community of learning (Elkins 2011).

The primary goal of our critiques in class is to highlight and analyze the meanings of the work presented. In this way, we will help each other to focus our future work toward the specific meanings we want to convey. Learning to make lens-based media works is a highly iterative process and critique is an integral component of reflective practice that should also include writing about your work (West 2011). If you are new to the process of critique and looking for guidance beyond this handout take a look at Mitch Goldstein's [How to Crit](#) website, and for a deeper dive into the topic, *The Critique Handbook* (Kendall and Crawford 2010) is recommended.

How will we orchestrate our critiques?

When you show your work, you may provide a brief introduction and share the title of the work. After a student screens their work, you will be asked to recall specifics details and aesthetic strategies employed in the work you just experienced.

Listen! Most students who are new to this process fail to understand that criticism of a work does not mean the work is bad, or that the maker has failed in some way. In order to refine our ability to produce effective works, we must listen to what the participants in the critique have to say about it.

We will strive to create an environment for empathetic, non-judgmental critique in order to build awareness through inquiry and discovery. We will strive to make comments and ask questions that are phrased in a manner that the maker of the work will want to hear it. This allows the maker of the work to discover what others notice about their work. Media makers construct new knowledge based on discoveries brought to light based on questioning.

Keep in mind that the object of critique is the work, not the maker. A critique of your work is not a critique of you as a person, but the success or failure, or the complete or incomplete status, of the work. It does not reflect on you as a person. By keeping the focus on the work when we are giving critique; and reminding ourselves the critique is about the work and not about us as a person, the process will be more productive. Learning to produced lens-based media is a highly iterative process, there is no failure, only iteration towards your goal.

During the critique you should take notes, use this guide to know what to takes notes on. During some critique sessions we'll assign a dedicated notetaker in order to allow participants to fully engage in the flow of the critique since it's very difficult to engage and take notes at the same time. Given the importance of the state of flow, the use of electronic devices is prohibited during critique (except for the dedicated notetaker) in order to reduce distractions during critique.

¹ This work draws on handouts by Seth Mulliken, Northeastern University and Daniel Goodwin, SUNY Albany, along with the references cited.

The most important thing to remember is that, although we may each be in this class for different reasons, we are all (presumably) striving to make more and better works. The tired old adage “I don’t know about Art, but I know what I like” is no longer applicable to your mode of inquiry. Yours is to be a rigorous and rich process of taking your work apart and putting it back together—better than before—with the help of a lively critical forum and your reflection on the description, analysis, interpretation, and evaluation of your work by your peers and instructor.

Description

Describe the work without using value statements and judgments such as “I like it” or “It is good.” Answer the question, “What do you see, hear, feel?”

- What is the title?
- Describe the subject matter. Are there recognizable images or sounds?
- Describe the important aesthetic elements of the work (i.e., framing, composition, use of space, use of color).
- Describe the technical qualities of the work (i.e., lens choice, focus, fidelity, timing).
- Describe the work in its context. Where and how are you experiencing it?
- What do you see, hear, feel?

Analysis

Describe how the work is organized as a complete whole. Use your observations about the aesthetic and technical qualities from the previous section. Answer the question, “How did the media maker create the work?”

- How is the work constructed or planned (i.e., order, timing, shape, flow)?
- Identify some of the patterns or differences throughout the work (i.e., images, sounds, compositions).
- Identify some of the points of emphasis in the work (i.e., directing of the eye, highlighting certain parts of objects of spaces).
- What are the relationships between objects and subjects? How does the work ‘treat’ the objects and subjects?
- What does the work ‘think’ about its subject? (e.g., it talks about love, but it doesn’t talk nicely about love).

Interpretation

Describe what the work helps you to feel and to think about. Use your observations and ideas from the two previous sections to support your answer to the question, “Why did the media maker create it, and what does it mean?”

- What feelings and meanings do you think this work represents?
- Describe the expressive qualities you find in the work. What would you say the emotional ‘tone’ of the work is (i.e., sad, happy, eerie, joyful)?
- What does the work expect you to know? What does it teach you?
- How does the work relate to other ideas or events in the world or in your other studies?
- Are there metaphors you can decipher?
- Although the denotative meaning may seem clear, what is the connotative meaning?

- Think of the work as a kind of essay, asking and answering a question. What is the question? How does it resolve it?
- What is the theme of the work? What is it about?
- What role does the title play in setting context and/or guiding your interpretation of the work?
- Can you identify your interpretation as preferred, negotiated, or contested?
- “Why did the media maker create it, and what does it mean?”

Evaluation

After describing, analyzing, and interpreting the work, you're then ready to respond with your evaluation of the work. Answer the questions “Is the work successful?”

- What is your / the creators criteria for success, and how do they differ?
- Does the work have artistic merit and how do you measure it?
- What, constructively, might make the work more successful?

References

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