

“Remember: when people tell you something’s wrong or doesn’t work for them, they are almost always right. When they tell you exactly what they think is wrong and how to fix it, they are almost always wrong.”
-Neil Gaiman

Yseult’s Quick and Dirty Cheat Sheet to Good Critiquing

By Shannon Yseult

Did you read that Neil Gaiman quote on the top? Because it’s the entire premise of this cheat sheet.

First we need to establish your goal as the person performing the critique. Highlight anything that stops you from enjoying or believing their story. The goal is to bring to the attention of the author anything that might not work for the reader. Nothing more and nothing less.

There are two kinds of comments, reactions and observations. **Reactions** are what you write down while you are reading their novel. **Observations** are a) obviously untrue facts that come up in the novel b) overuse of words c) things you are still thinking about once the novel is done.

When you are writing reactions say as little as possible while still being useful. Perhaps you needed to read a sentence three times to really understand it. Write 3X next to it. Move on. The characters are chatting about something boring? Write ‘slow’ next to the scene and move on. This streamlines your commenting process and it helps keep you highlighting problem areas without trying to fix them.

When you are writing observations there is less emphasis on brevity and more on positive, informative communication. Your goal is to as nicely as possible explain that 1+1 does not equal 3. Kindly point out that your author used over 500 semi-colons in their novel and most Americans don’t even know what a semi-colon is. Tell them that a quick Google search showed that there have been more than 11 fictional detectives named Frank Steel, you had thought you recognized the name and wanted to inform them of its popularity. Rich and Kelly go to Vegas on page 250 and are never heard from again, I gotta know if they eloped or not. This part often includes important overarching plot observations and other particularly useful things for the writer. Include as much useful feedback as you can as positively as you can without trying to fix any problems you are describing. It’s hard but that’s what makes or breaks a critique.

Grammar, spelling, and typo’s are by definition observations. I mean it’s a fact that commode is spelled with two m’s. You can’t argue that. As a reader you usually notice them while directly reading the novel. Therefore I usually write them down with my reaction comments. If you are organized enough to keep a page referencing all the grammar, spelling, and typo’s go for it. If not then just write them down as you go.

Lastly, don’t forget to comment on the positive as well as the negative! Pretend you’re highlighting in two colors. Don’t forget to use both, that which should stay the same and that which needs to change.

Commonly used reaction words and when to use them:

2X – I had to read that two times

Slow – I gotta admit that I’m a little bored

Pacing – Something’s up with that pacing

POV – I don’t know who is talking when

Original – Something cool I wasn’t expecting

Clunky – Gotta rework this scene

Worldbuilding – This makes me want to know more about the world

Relevance – This scene isn’t helping the plot

Awesome – What just happened was awesome