

## How We Talk When We Talk About Poems



*The act of writing poetry is something that is very personal to us poets, and sharing it for the first time can be a very frightening experience. The first experience of having your work criticized can boggle your mind and set you back a step in your writing. However, critique is essential in any writer's career. Accepting criticism is something that we all must face, even if we don't like it.*

—Rose DeRocher

### **HOW TO GIVE A CRITIQUE:**

Short reviews like: "Good poem," "I like this" or "I don't like this," are not useful to any poet. When giving feedback, remember that poets are looking for a specific, in-depth critique. We grow and thrive as writers by getting both praise and constructive criticism on our work.

At all times keep your responses respectful. You don't have to take a critical, lengthy review approach, when commenting on poetry (some of you may not be ready for that, yet). You might just want to comment on the way the poem struck you, what you liked about a poem, and/or what threw you off about a poem. Maybe you can quote part of the poem and tell why you liked a specific stanza, line, phrase, or word. You don't have to write a book; just a few comments can really help someone know what works and what doesn't. Remember to be tactful, and never disrespect the writer. **Poets are sensitive souls, and they take their poetry to heart. There is a wrong way (ineffective), and a right way (effective) to say everything.**

**Here is an example:** You just read a poem and all you can find are reasons you disliked it. Maybe it had a number of spelling/grammar mistakes, and run on sentences, erratic lines, or is impenetrably vague. Maybe it isn't what you think a poem *should be*. Instead of commenting on just the bad parts of the poem or pontificating on what you believe a poem should be, start out by pointing out the good things. For instance, you could say, "This poem has strong emotional qualities and I am interested in the passion that fuels it, but at the same time, I had trouble understanding the anger in the poem. Perhaps the poem would be more effective if the anger were represented by a concrete image, like the hole his father's fist might have left in the wall."

### **HOW NOT TO GIVE A CRITIQUE:**

**Never critique the author; critique the poem.** Resist putting the poem in your own words—work with the *core* of what is on the page. Resist grammar lessons; if there are sentence level errors in a poem, mark them, but do not waste precious workshop time discussing them. If the errors interfere with the meaning of the poem (and are not intentionally transgressive—ala e.e. cummings—I will work with the author). Never think that you are an expert in your field. **All poets have room for improvement.** Never look at another poem as a failure. Instead, keep in mind, just as in movies, not every poem will appeal to you. Don't point out every line in the poem that needs work. You should save that for a more in-depth critique, if the poet desires it. I wholly encourage you to set up writing groups outside of class.

Finally, no one learns from a *cheerleader* or *arrogant critic*—these are not ways to help people, or become a member of a dynamic writers' workshop. We are here to engage in the writer's life on the highest level.

## Moving Beyond the Do's & Don'ts

Poetry can be a challenging labyrinth of words when analyzing. The tips and terminology listed below will help you identify the meaning through its parts and give a sense of interpreting a poem; they will also help you build your own aesthetic criteria. Since each poem is unique, there is no one way of going about this. Nonetheless, the general advice goes like this:

### Interpreting Poetry: Some Tips

1. *Look* at the poem. How has the author utilized the page and in what ways does it distract and/or contribute to the effect of the poem?
2. Read the title. Titles are sometimes vital in one's understanding of a poem. Sometimes they lead into the poem.
3. Read the poem. Look for setting, topic, and voice.
4. If possible, divide the poem into parts: intro, rising action, climax, declining action, conclusion. If these parts are not present or discernible, you may try to locate the fulcrum of the poem, where the poem shifts and/or changes.
5. What tone (speaker's attitude towards what s/he is saying) does the poem have? Pay close attention to diction (word choice) and the denotative and connotative meanings of individual words. For example, a word like *heavy* is literally "having relatively great weight" and connotatively "profound, deep, or poignant"—maybe even "sad."
6. Attempt to explicate/summarize the poem, though some poems intentionally subvert this.

### Poetic Terminology

#### Genre/Form

All poems have form. What "type" of poem is it? Is it a free verse, couplet, tercet, quatrain, cinquain, haiku, lyric, narrative, elegy, sonnet, villanelle, list, etc. Different genres have separate attributes, purposes and emphases.

#### Voice

Who is the speaker (in fiction, we have a narrator; in poetry, we have a speaker)? What point of view is the speaker? Is the speaker involved in the action or reflection of the poem? What perspective (social, intellectual, political) does the speaker show? The voice and perspective of the speaker tells us something about the poem's context.

#### Argument/Thesis/Theme

What does the poet want to communicate. What is the poem "about" or what effect does it produce? What are the obvious and less obvious conflicts? What are the key statements and relationships of the poem? The thesis/argument/theme gives an indication of what tone the poem is written in: historical, social, personal. Consider the author's use of allusions.

#### Structure

What is the poem's formal structure (number of lines, meters, stanzas, rhyme scheme, etc.)?

#### Setting

What type of "world" is the poem set in? The time, place—is it concrete, tonal, connotative, ironic, symbolic, theoretical, allegorical?

#### Imagery

How does the poem appeal to the sense of sight, hearing, touch, smell, taste?

## Key Statements

What direct or indirect statements are made—repetition, refrains, actions?

## Sound & Velocity

How does the poem sound & move? Consider stanzas, line length, enjambment, punctuation, monosyllabic and polysyllabic words, alliteration, assonance, consonance, onomatopoeia rhythm and rhyme. A quick review of rhyme:

- **internal:** “I pass through the pores of ocean and shores.” (Shelley’s “The Cloud”)
- **end:**  
Whose woods these are I think I *know*  
His house is in the village, *though* (Frost’s “Stopping by the Woods on a Snowy Evening”)
- **perfect/hard/exact/true/full:** sky/high, green/spleen
- **slant** (imperfect, partial, near, off, etc): thumb/gun, heart/star, milk/walk, leave/believe  
(a note on slant rhyme: Two words share a vowel sound or a consonant sound. Slant rhyme is a technique perhaps more in tune with contemporary writing than perfect rhyme).
- **eye:** bough/rough

## Language Use (Diction)

What kind of words are used? Do the words have double meanings? What about connotations, puns or ambiguities?

## Allusion

Does the poem have a meaning from another work? Be sure to look up (dictionary or Google) any allusion (and word!) you do not know.

## Qualities that Evoke the Reader

What sort of experience does the poem give its reader? How does the poem resonate?

## Ideology or Worldview

What are the values and basic ideals expressed?

## **Small Group Writers’ Workshop Etiquette: *Cold Readings*** ***(beginning the second week of class)***

The following guidelines will help us become effective critics and better writers:

1. Introduce yourselves. Avoid disclaimers (as much as possible).
2. Try to limit the workshopping of any one poem to ten minutes. Focus. Stay on task.
3. Choose someone to begin by reading his/her poem out loud.
4. Workshop members should follow along during the reading, preferably without making notations on the poem. Allow yourselves a “pure” reading and listening experience without your critical pens poised mid-air. This, of course, does not mean that you turn off your eyes, ears, and minds, only that you allow the poem to unfold before you on its own terms.
5. After the poet reads, the workshop group should take a “moment of silence” to reread the poem and make specific notes to the poet in the margins, between lines, and at the bottom of the poem. The more specific your observations, the better. Rather than using abstract descriptors such as “good” or “bad,” it would be better to write “I’m confused by this word” or “this image works well with content of the poem,” or “this line is familiar.” Try to focus on what you as a reader respond or react to in the poem. Where does it startle, move or evoke interest? Where is the poem working for you, and where does it seem to struggle (in your humble opinion)?

Then write the following **on** the poem:

- a) Objectively explicate (summarize) the poem (no more than one or two sentences).
  - b) Identify a specific strength in the poem.
  - c) Locate something about the poem that does not work for you—again, be specific.
  - d) Formulate a question about the poem for the group. For example: “How do you think the poet intends that last line to resonate?” “Do you think the second stanza is necessary?” “Might the poem benefit from more attention to sound?” “Do you think that the poem might work better in tercets (3 line stanzas) instead of one stanza?”
6. Once everyone has completed a-d, begin discussion of the poem with individual to the writer’s right. This individual should share his/her response to a-d (above) with the group. **Do not address the poet; do not look at the poet as you speak. S/he is a fly on the wall until the workshop discussion is concluded.** Once the person to the right of the writer has shared a-d, the group can begin workshoping the poem. The group may begin with the question or some other aspect of the first critique and move on from there. Again, during oral discussion it is best to describe your own response to the poem—areas of pleasure as well as confusion—rather than simply pontificating (“When I write...” or “Poems should...”). No one person should dominate the discussion of a poem. Try to monitor yourself so that everyone has the opportunity to share their thoughts. I will rotate the groups in which I sit.
  7. **During discussion, the poet must remain silent and listen to the comments made by the group members (taking notes voraciously, of course).**
  8. If the poet chooses, she or he can ask for clarification or make brief closing comments at the end of the discussion. Avoid defensive posturing at all costs.
  9. Finally, the poems **should be signed** and handed back to the poet; comments should be thoughtfully considered during the revision process. Turn in ALL written feedback from the workshop (or e-mail) with the revised poem the following week. Do not doodle on each other’s poems. I will carefully review your workshop efforts.
  10. Next, repeat the cycle with a new poem.
  11. **Important Note: If you run out of time and do not get to all the poems in the group, then you have homework. You are expected to treat the poem with the same detail given in the classroom and e-mail your feedback to the poet. Poets should print e-mailed feedback and turn it in as if they had received it in class. No one should be shortchanged because the group runs out of time.**
  12. NOT-SO-SMALL PRINT: NO PEDANTIC OR ELITIST ATTITUDES TOWARDS POETRY, COMBATIVENESS, NEGATIVE RATHER THAN CONSTRUCTIVE CRITICISM. WHETHER YOU LIKE SOMETHING OR NOT, WHETHER IT IS YOUR “TYPE” OF POETRY OR NOT, DOES NOT MATTER. YOUR JOB IN A WRITERS’ WORKSHOP IS TO OPEN YOUR MIND AND PROVIDE CONSTRUCTIVE CRITICISM. “I DON’T LIKE THIS TYPE OF POETRY” IS NEVER AN INTELLIGENT OR HELPFUL RESPONSE.