

Crit at CDG

Background

“ *The crit is a distinctive, unique communal practice that exists only in the graduate and undergraduate art departments of colleges. While it has some similarities to other communal practices (such as group therapy, or the boardroom presentation), it is rooted in the singular and peculiar ethos of the art institute.*

The premise of crit is that the group can convey insight to the student, bringing a degree of objectivity to the highly subjective directives of his or her private creative process. Ideally, a student leaves the crit as a better artist, with new understanding of his work, his process, and himself. Crit has the quality of a ritual; it is a performance enacted within a small subculture of initiates who are sensitive to the subtleties of meaning it carries. Like all rituals, it comes with its own rules, etiquette, and taboos.”

–Kurt Ralske, [The Crit](#)

“ *The writers’ workshop begins when ten or so people decide to read, review, and critique each other’s work under the guidance of a moderator. [...] The moderator is charged with maintaining the dignity of the silent author by not permitting the discussion to be directed at or about him or her—it is about the work and not the person. [...] The order of comments—summary, positive feedback, suggestions for improvement—is designed to maximize the comfort of the author in hearing the comments. The other participants thus act more like coauthors offering helpful suggestions rather than harsh criticisms.*

–Richard Gabriel, [Writers’ Workshops and the Work of Making Things](#)

Structure

A crit is a dialogue. It’s an **opportunity** for the researcher/programmer/designer/author/artist to get feedback from outside their own headspace, and a **privilege** for the critic/viewer/user to enter the exciting, frustrating, nuanced and messy part of a peer’s creative process.

Prompts to the Researcher

1. What is the context of the work?
2. What is the goal, question, hypothesis?
3. Who is your audience?
4. Present the work
5. What kind of feedback would be most helpful?

Prompts to the Critics

1. Describe what you saw. What is the work saying/demonstrating to you?
2. What works well for you?
3. What doesn't work for you?
4. What suggestions can you give to move the work forward in the way the researcher needs?

Helpful Tips

Tips for the Researcher

- Come prepared with an idea of the kind of help you need:
 - Do you need to know how people react to something specific?
 - Are you struggling with any big questions?
 - Are you completely lost?
- Keep defenses down, be generous as much as possible.
- **Steer the conversation** if it's not going in a way that is useful for you.
- Remember that this conversation is about the work you made, not about you.
- Be comfortable with silence as the critics take time to absorb the work.
- Realize that not everything said will be useful to you. Take everything with a grain of salt – if some feedback doesn't help you, it doesn't help you, so just **toss it out**.
- Avoid describing your work with vague value judgements such as “cool” – what does that mean? Try to be articulate about where your idea is coming from and why your audience should care.

Tips for the Critic

- Take the proper amount of time to listen to / engage in the work, and view / use it as the researcher asked you to.
- Accept the researcher and their premise.
- Keep defenses down, be generous as much as possible.
- Give honest feedback as suggestions, not directives.
- Avoid imposing phrases like “You should work on [this or that]” and “I was trying to nudge you in this direction” and instead try suggestive phrasing such as “Something you can try, if you haven't already is...”

- Avoid generality and universality in your feedback, even if the work is meant to be used by a wide audience. Respond to projects with your personal biases and reactions, and trust that the generalities will emerge.
- Avoid tangential thoughts that don't help the work in front of you.
- Avoid giving suggestions that are about you or your history; you do not matter in this critique session. **Make everything you say about the work.**
- Bring up external references only as long as they help the work move forward.
- This is not about clapping or giving a pat on the back, or insulting or bringing someone down. It is only about honest feedback about the work in front of you and trying to help the researcher move forward in their creative process. No medals are being given out, so relax and have fun helping a peer with their ideas!

Remember

“ **Compassion.** *Creativity is the locus of growth. And things that are growing are necessarily underdeveloped and vulnerable. One must be careful not to trample on them. The critic must remain aware that making art is not easy, and that the work before him represents the student's best efforts. Crit should be trial by jury of peers, not of superiors. If the critic operates with genuine compassion, feedback becomes more palatable to the student; even strongly corrective feedback may be welcomed, if the student is convinced that she is being considered with respect and care.*”

–Kurt Ralske

Evelyn Eastmond and Patrick Dubroy, March 2015