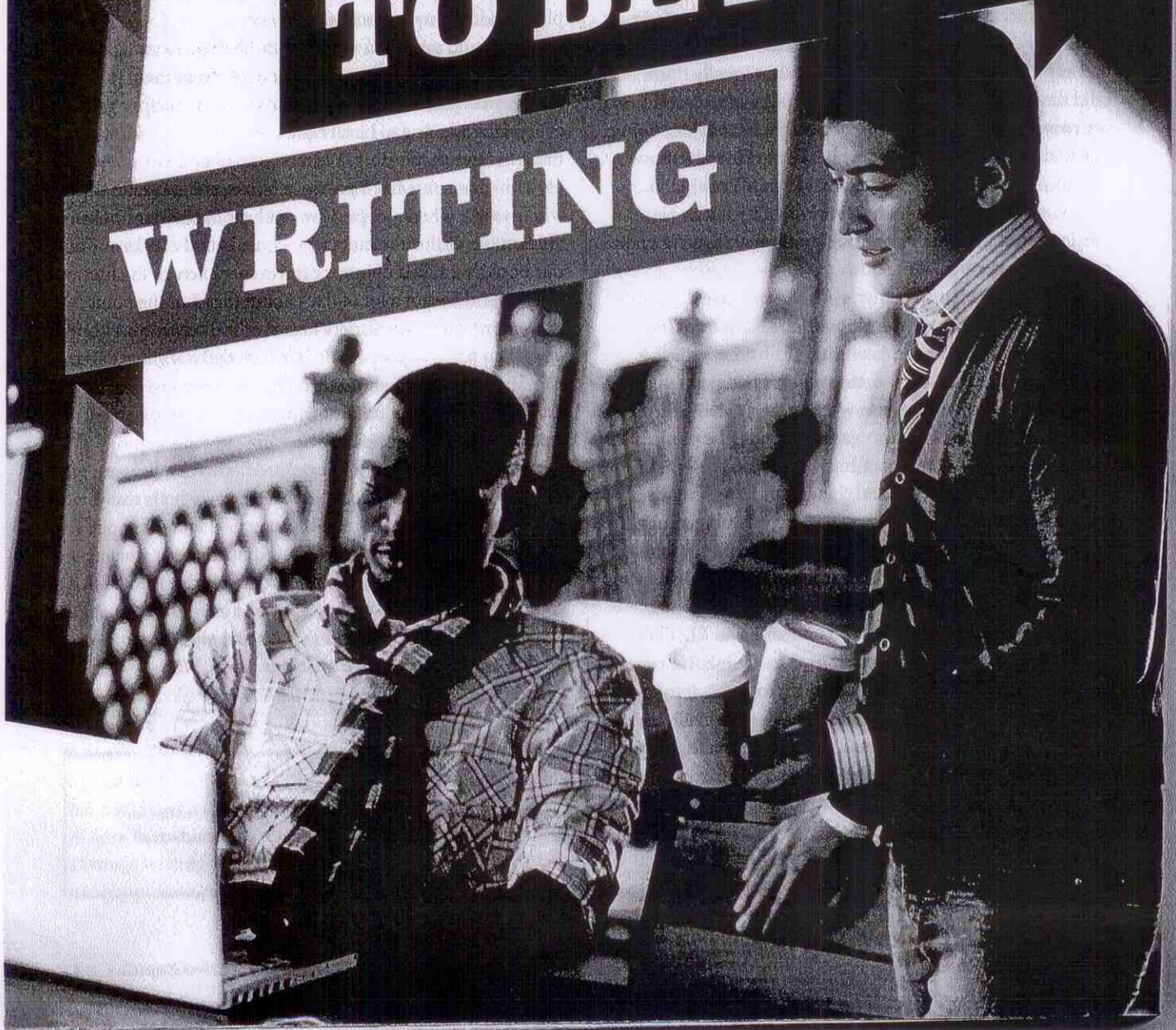


**CRITIQUE**

**YOUR WAY**

**TO BETTER**

**WRITING**



If you've ever had mixed emotions about critique groups—as in, you want to *get* critiques, but wish you didn't have to spend so much time *giving* them—you're not alone. Here's how to turn every critique you give into a win-win for your own work.

BY BECKY LEVINE

**H**ave you just paired up with your first critique partner? Maybe you've been in a group for a while, but think the critiquing lacks a certain ... oomph. Everybody's supportive, everybody's writing, but you're not seeing a lot of progress on either side of the table. Not to mention, you've been putting an awful lot of hours into other people's projects. You're starting to wonder: Aside from churning out critiques in hopes of getting some useful feedback in return, *what can you do to make this whole thing really worthwhile?*

You can take advantage of this often overlooked opportunity to improve your own writing by first developing your critique skills. Just like any art or craft, critiquing is made up of specific techniques, approaches and sensibilities that need strengthening. Some writers worry that participating in a critique group will take away from the time and energy they need to put into their own work. What these writers don't know (yet!) is that every critique skill they grow will come back to them, to their stories or books, in ways they can't yet envision. The more chapters you read, the more feedback you deliver, the stronger a reader you'll become. And those things you've learned along the way? You'll turn right around and apply them to your own writing and revising. *That's* the payoff.

What are these strengths that make a truly powerful critiquer *and* writer? Don't worry—it's not a long list. To develop the savvy you'll need on both sides of the critique table, focus on three important pieces of the process: identifying trouble spots, finding the root of problems, and presenting a clear plan for revision.

### **IDENTIFYING TROUBLE SPOTS**

You've been reading for a long time. Years. Decades. Your love of reading is probably one of the main reasons you write. It's also one of the reasons you've most likely developed some habits that, whether you're critiquing someone else's writing or heading into a revision of your own, you'll need to break.

When you pick up a published book or magazine, you're reading for pleasure. *Pleasure* means you get to read however you want. If an article spends too much time on an explanation, you can skim. If a novel's battle scene gets distractingly gory, you might skip ahead. If a memoir's opening doesn't hook you, you just put the book down. You don't *have* to read anything.

And when we're looking at our own words, we often do some of this same skipping and skimming without even realizing it. So many obstacles can get in the way of seeing our work clearly: confusion, fear, the (usually mistaken) belief that we've already got everything right. Sometimes, it's just easier to ignore the deeper problems, to make a few line edits to trouble spots and call that "revising."

Luckily, the very opposite is true of critiquing. You've made a deal with your critique partner: *You show me yours, I'll show you mine.* You've committed to reading every page this writer gives you. And you've committed to reading it deeply, *thinking* about the words you're seeing. Which, by the way, is excellent training for doing the same thing for your own writing.

As a critiquer, your first job is to listen to yourself, to the reactions you're having as you read. What do I mean by reactions? Feelings. Emotions. Sometimes those feelings will be good ones—smiles, laughs, falling in love with a character or swooning over a beautiful description in a travel book. You'll write an appreciative *Hal* or draw a smiley face in the margin of the manuscript (yes, you will!), and you'll happily keep going. Until you read something that causes a different reaction, a not-so-good feeling. You'll find yourself bored, or confused, or even a little bit irritated.

You'll want to skim and skip, just like when you're reading for fun. You'll want to ignore that feeling in your gut, the one that says *something's not right here.* Don't. This is exactly the feeling you need to focus on, to give your full attention. This is the feeling that starts your critique. It's a *good* feeling. Why? Because the more you work to recognize this reaction, the easier it will be for you to catch a weakness in any manuscript. Including your own.

Resist the pull of forward movement, the temptation to gaze ahead in hopes of another place where you can praise your critique partner. Instead, look closely at the spot where you hit the feeling. Reread the passage. Hunt for the problem. Maybe a novel's character has gone from sweet to sour for no apparent reason. Maybe a self-help book's suggestion sounds unrealistic or impossibly hard. If the problem is small and easy to explain, your job is simple—make a quick note in the margin explaining it to the author. Then you can keep going.

But what if the problem isn't small? What if you're stuck, with your gut saying something's wrong and your brain replying that it has no clue what that *something* is?

How many times has this happened when you were staring at your own words? Too often? Well, good news. You're heading into the next stage of critiquing, the step that will teach you to push past these moments and find out what's behind those problems that you know are there.

### **FINDING THE ROOT OF PROBLEMS**

If writing were as easy as correcting the little errors and rewriting the not-perfect sentences, we'd all be doing it. Oh, wait, we are. OK, if it were that easy, we'd be critiquing only for the benefit of others, out of the goodness of our hearts. Ha. Who are we kidding? We're not—our writing time is way too valuable for that.

Developing a strong critique teaches you to go beyond the small stuff. As you grow your critique skills, you'll learn to look below the surface text and get to the root of a problem, to identify its cause. A good way to start this process is to think about the elements that make up our projects, fiction or nonfiction—writing tools such as character, explanatory narrative, scenes, dialogue, description and voice. Pretty much every weakness in a manuscript is a weakness in one of the big elements, a place where the author—whether that's your critique partner or you—hasn't wielded a tool quite well enough. When you critique, you're putting in practice time figuring out, over and over, which tool that is.

Remember those reactions we talked about earlier: boredom, confusion, irritation? Let's take a closer look at one of them. I'll pick boredom.

Your critique partner has submitted a short story that takes place in a garden. You love gardens. Nothing makes you happier than digging up weeds, putting out fertilizer and watching the green push up through the soil. So you expect to be happy and engaged—but instead, the opening scene already has you yawning.

Hold the scene up to the “light” of your writing tools. Are the characters uninteresting? Does the plot lack tension? Could the voice use energy? Is the dialogue flat? Read the scene again and again, until you realize that every time you see a quotation mark, you want to jump ahead. Or that, when you're supposed to be listening to the characters speak, you're actually planning tonight's dinner. Aha! The problem's in the dialogue.

Not so fast, though. You've still got another step. You know the *what*: dialogue. You still need to figure out the *how*: How is the dialogue causing the boredom? Do the characters all speak the same way? Is their conversation an infodump, a long explanation of backstory? Is the argument too quiet and rational, when it should be heated and dramatic?

Have patience with yourself, and put forth your best effort. Home in on that story element that's creating the problem. Then take it just a little further and analyze what is and isn't working. The more you critique, the easier answering these questions will become—and the more those answers will reveal themselves in your own work, sometimes before you even need to ask the questions. Because by doing regular, serious thinking about your critique partners' manuscripts, not only will you grow the skills that will make your partners love you, but you'll learn more and more about how each writing element works.

### **PRESENTING A CLEAR PLAN**

#### **FOR REVISION**

You've done a lot of work. You've found ways to go deeper into a manuscript than you've ever been. You're starting to see layers and connections that were hidden to you before. You're almost there.

The last thing you're going to do, the final step in mastering the critique skills that can improve your own writing, is to articulate what you've learned. You're going to give the author the best piece of your partnership: a powerful critique that will help him revise his work.

Some critiquers assume their feedback should cover every single flaw, big and little, that they've discovered. Honestly, trying to include this much information is a great way to overwhelm your critique partner *and* yourself. Instead, focus on the few problems that occur the most frequently and consistently, the weaknesses you think should be at the top of the To-Revise list. For each one, you'll want to do three things: Explain, give examples and make suggestions.

**WHEN YOU GET TO THE ROOT OF  
A STORY'S PROBLEM, YOU  
STRENGTHEN YOUR OWN  
WRITING SKILLS IN A WAY  
THAT NO BOOK OR CLASS CAN.**

Make your explanation as clear as you can. Let's say we're critiquing not a short story that takes place in a garden, but a gardening book's chapter about growing vegetables. You, who grew up in an apartment with no green space bigger than a flower box, are faced with several pages about preparing an entire backyard to grow everything from cabbages to runner beans. You're not bored this time; you're confused. You reread, you think about those writing tools, and you realize your confusion is caused by the long narratives in which the author has hidden the practical steps you need.

Write a thorough, helpful description of what isn't working. Take your time on this part of the critique. Be respectful and supportive, but don't shortcut your explanation. You know what they say: Until you can explain it, you don't really understand it. Here's where you prove that saying true. Taking the easy way out doesn't help your critique partner, and it for sure doesn't help you when it comes time to get to the heart of what needs improving in your own work.

Include an example of the problem. Briefly describe a specific spot that demonstrates what you've just explained. Point your partner to those three pages in which he muddled his instructions by including vague musings about how lucky you are not to be plowing the entire back 40 of his farmland.

You've explained. You've provided examples. Is there anything else you can do? Definitely. You can make suggestions for revision. You can look closely at what's missing in the current manuscript and toss your partner an idea or three about how to strengthen it.

Stroll into the garden with me one more time. Let's drop all those plants into a memoir now, one person's story about growing up with a green-thumbed grandfather. You're experiencing yet another emotion—this time,

it's that irritation I mentioned earlier. Why? Because the writer has written an entire chapter from the outside perspective of her older self, so that the story voice is dry and distant. What can she do to change that voice? What can you *suggest* for her to try?

It's time to stretch your brainstorming muscles. Show your critique partner, and yourself, that you have the ability to dream up different possibilities. Maybe you recommend that the author think back to how, as a child, she actually *experienced* her grandfather's garden. You say that maybe she could describe what the plants looked like to her 3-year-old self, or detail what the flowers smelled like. You ask if there were bees, and if the author remembers being afraid of the stingers, or fascinated by the fuzziness. You share your ideas.

You may worry that, by suggesting specific changes, you'll come across as forcing your own vision onto your critique partner. Here's an important thing to remember: A suggestion is not a demand. A suggestion is one more way to *show* an author what you've explained. Your critique partner might use one of your ideas. He might not. Either choice is fine. You've given him food for thought, revision ammunition. By explaining, by pointing out examples, presenting some possibilities, you've helped him take a big step toward the next draft of his book. And by forcing yourself to follow through with developing your own ideas—regardless of whether or not your partner uses them—you've taken huge steps toward transforming all this practice into a stronger understanding of how you can find solutions for your own work. You may not know it yet, but you're already powering your own revisions toward the next draft.

Is critiquing a lot of work? It is. Does it take up a not-so-small chunk of your creative time? It does. Is the job worth it?

Definitely.

Every bit of effort you put into your feedback, into the critiques you produce, will take you miles further along your writing path. When you dig deep into a manuscript, when you get to the root of a story's problem, when you explain clearly and help another author revise, you strengthen your own writing skills in a way that no book or class can.

And I promise you'll find that you really can critique your way to better writing. **WD**

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