

## **BSFW CRITIQUE CHECKLIST**

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Your spontaneous reactions are far more important than any checklist but the following may help you convert vague, “something’s not working for me,” commentary...that gives the writer little to work with...into specific recommendations for rewriting. And don’t forget the old saw about a picture...or an example in this case...being worth a thousand words. Actually rewriting a difficult sentence, or deleting the excess you don’t feel is necessary from a slow, overwritten section is far more useful and specific than just talking about it. (The writer, of course, will still be perfectly free to rewrite his/her own way, but will have the advantage of knowing exactly what you’re talking about.)

### CRITIQUE CHECKLIST

#### I. Main Character (Protagonist):

##### Compelling

If the main character isn’t either sympathetic, or at least interesting, readers won’t be motivated to read a story about her/him.

##### Flawed

Without a flaw the main character won’t be sufficiently challenged in overcoming the story’s obstacles. The climax of the story should always include the main character finally changing since, without doing so, the main obstacle in the story can’t be overcome.

##### “Rounded”

The main character should have depth and complexity rather than being a cookie-cutter stereotype. (The flaw is part of this “rounding.”) However ancient the text, E.M. Forster’s description of the distinction between a “rounded” and “flat” character in his book *Aspects of the Novel* is still the best.

#### 2. Story:

Despite zillions of books on the subject all good story structure is based on the classic three-act play which...using the classic western in which the sheriff gets shot in the first paragraph...goes something like this:

##### Introduction

Only people standing between meek Western town and bad-guy gang led by sadist is tough sheriff and two of his three deputies who are equally tough.

##### Inciting Incident/Plot Point One

Bad guys shoot tough sheriff and his two tough deputies. Remaining deputy, only deputized cuz his brother is the sheriff, is Dweeb of the First Water, an unrelenting pacifist who cries if anyone steps on an ant. (The inciting incident needs to be serious enough to immediately propel the main character, the

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dweeb in this case, into action and of a nature that guarantees that the main character's life will never be the same.)

### Rising Action

Situation zigzagging from bad to worse includes partial recoveries of the injured followed by eventual deaths of all three, and bad guys progressively doing worse and worse things to the townspeople. On a graph it should look like a gradual rise from not-so-bad to really terrible with slight "backward" slides into "things are better" when the dweeb manages to at least improve things temporarily by silver-tonguing the bad guys into reasonable behavior, buying them off, et cetera. Last big slide into "things are better" is when more moderate bad guy takes over gang leadership from sadist.

### False Climax\*

In order to establish his credibility with the gang, the more moderate leader decides to wipe out the whole town.

### False End/Resolution\*

Somehow...after much blood, sweat and tears...dweeb manages to silver-tongue "moderate" leader out of it.

### Real Climax

Moderate leader loses face with gang so sadist resumes leadership and is not only going to slaughter everyone in town but use torture to do so. All the stalls/finesse dweeb has used previously are now either used up or useless.

### Real End/Resolution

Dweeb finally discards his pacifism-no-matter-what, picks up a gun (which takes everyone by surprise) and kills the sadist who has just grabbed the librarian he already widowed's small child.

### Loose Ends

Moderate leader takes over gang again, and they all decide to move to Mars. Dweeb marries librarian.

\*for novel-length stories

## **III. Presentation:**

### Exposition/Layering

Necessary worldbuilding and background information should never stop the forward motion of the story but rather be layered in such that it serves more than one purpose at the same time. An example is an argument which both develops the relationship arc between two characters and gives the reader valuable information about their world. It is also important to present exposition as needed, not too much at once but always before the reader needs it to understand what is going on.

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### Dialogue

Should flow naturally, pretty closely following the rhythm of an actual conversation without a lot of fancy descriptive in between speeches. Ideally it should be pretty close to straight dialogue with enough differentiation between the ways different characters speak and the things they typically say that the reader really doesn't have to be told who is speaking.

### Scene Setting

Ideally all five senses will be used to pull the reader into the world of the story. A few "mood moments" describing the world of the story can let the reader catch his or her breath between sections chock full of fast-paced action.

### Credibility

The world constructed and the characters must be believable.

### Foreshadowing v. Deus Ex Machina

Solutions to challenges in the plot can't come out of thin air.

### Prose Style

Should be clear, fluid, richly varied and have a charming personal flavor that encourages the reader to keep reading. The undisputed bible on the subject, which no writer should be without, is still Strunk and White's Elements of Style. Their list of reminders about style, which included such gems as "write with nouns and verbs" (only) and "avoid the use of qualifiers" should be memorized.

EXAMPLES OF POSSIBLE COMMENTARY (on the story outlined above):

1.

The story and characters are fine but I've supplied samples of the kinds of changes I'd make so your prose style is smoother, easier to understand, and more appealing.

2.

Honestly I don't care enough about the main character in the beginning of the story to want to continue reading to find out what happens to him. I think it would help if the main character, the dweeb, showed more emotion when his brother, the sheriff, dies. Also I understand his reaction, when the sadist gang leader tortured their parents to death when they were kids, was extreme pacifism but think he should at least appear to consider his brother's moving plea not to err by going to extremes.

3.

I'm interested enough in the main character but the severity of the Inciting Incident isn't made clear enough at the beginning so I probably wouldn't have continued reading past that point. I think you need to show us sooner that the people who shoot the sheriff and his other two deputies aren't just random

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bad guys passing through who will never again pose a threat to the town. It might help if the sheriff died sooner and gave his moving speech about how the dweeb must now stop this same gang that has been terrorizing the town since they killed their parents when the sheriff and the dweeb were kids. Also having the sheriff die sooner increases the severity in the beginning by eliminating right away the possibility that he'll recover.

4.

Your rising action isn't really working for me since the progression of problems seems to be from severe to less severe in the following two cases: when the dweeb goes nuts trying to locate a missing library book after finding the first corpse, and when the massacre of an entire family is followed up with a bad guy slapping someone in the saloon. In both instances my interest gets deflated when a less serious problem follows a more serious problem. I think it would be easy enough to move the bar slap to the very beginning of the story, because it does showcase the mentality of the gang as opposed to the townspeople nicely. But I would eliminate the lost library book altogether...insignificant at any point in this story...and find another way to show the beginning of the love-interest relationship between the dweeb and the librarian.

5.

The gang moving to Mars at the end comes out of nowhere; I didn't even know this was speculative fiction. I think you need to establish this genre, and that moving to Mars is possible and how, in the very beginning.

Finally remember it is equally important to mention what you feel works well, so the writer knows when he/she is on the right track.