

## How to Critique

### Process

- **Ignore any other opinions you may have heard** – including the authors! Come to each piece completely fresh and unbiased.
- **You can give opinions as a knowledgeable reader**, not just as a fellow writer. Did you enjoy it?
- **Where possible, don't just identify what could be changed, but make a suggestion as to how.** 'I didn't like the lead character' is not as useful as 'I didn't like the lead character, she was too aggressive and one dimensional' is not as useful as 'The lead character would come to life if you gave her a reason for her coldness, and opened up more dimensions, perhaps a love interest, perhaps a child, perhaps an overbearing father... etc.'
- Where possible, **don't just identify what was wrong, identify strengths too**, and if possible – why they were strengths – how did they make you feel? Terrified in a good horror? Uplifted in a good romance? Fascinated in a good detective story?
- Unless the writer asks specifically for different feedback, **give the feedback as you would like to hear it.** Do unto others!

### Check List

- **Title / Opening** – are you grabbed immediately, is the premise set out clearly up front, would you have bought this if you'd been browsing in a bookshop?
- **Conflict** – is there a mental/moral/physical conflict caused by incompatible aims/desires that must be overcome? If not, is there emotional conflict within the lead character themselves? It's this conflict that will drive the character to make decisions that will lead to growth and finally resolution. This is why we will want to read the story.
- **Plot** – is it clear and believable, was a problem (above) set and solved, is time and place quickly defined?
- **Setting** – is the description enough to believe the background is real? Is there too much description at the expense of character and plot?
- **Character** – do they seem real? Do they seem grounded in a history of family, friends, colleagues, even if these aren't mentioned? Are they accurately and consistently portrayed, even with the paradoxes we want in every character? Do they develop through conflict? Would you spend a week on holiday with them? (You would if it was a novel and you took it to the beach.)
- **Dialogue** – does this seem consistent with the characters? Was there too much or too little, did it seem

real? Can you always tell who is speaking?

- **Point of view** – can you easily identify the pov, and is it appropriate for the story?
- **Show / Tell** – does the character taste a fantastic rare steak with a creamy sauce, or does the writer tell you that they had a decent meal? Take care to identify pieces of 'Tell' and rather than criticize them for that, look at whether it was intentional by the writer for mood/feel etc.

### **Additional**

- **Text Format** – many people have preferred fonts, preferred text size and preferred layouts to their printed writing. Was it easy to read? To submit to a publisher they often want a plain font (Times New Roman?) double spaced lines, clear paragraph definition and good sized margins. These last ones are important for people to critique your work too – to make notes.
- **Grammar / Spelling** – if you spot mistakes, note them, but these can and will be cleared up, more importantly did they stop you reading the piece? If they were too numerous/obvious, it may have stopped you really reviewing the character and plot etc above properly.
- **Style** – was it humorous? Ponderous? Thunderous? Whatever you felt it was, did it work? Was it laboured or light? Gentle and delicate or highly strung? Was it appropriate?

### **Tips**

- **Admit if you are biased** – if you love historical romances, you might find yourself too harshly commenting on a flawed one, or alternatively overly praising it, because it's your genre. If you can't stand them, you may overlook a really good piece of writing.
- Remind yourself, and the writer, that **your comments are only your opinion**.
- If you have time, always **read the piece through once without a critical eye**, just as a reader. Note your immediate thoughts, then read a second time with a reviewer's eye.
- **Make sure your tone is always supportive** – comments can and should be both negative and positive, but always supportive.