

# A New Model for Critique

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Bruce M. Mackh, PhD

## Critiquing Student Work

Studio art instructors regularly provide feedback to students about their creative work beyond rubrics and other assessment mechanisms, usually through informal meetings with individual students or more formalized group critique sessions. Educators take a variety of approaches to this task. Some instructors become notorious for being impossible to please, a reputation they cultivate deliberately because they believe it motivates students to work harder and achieve more. Other instructors maintain a belief that only blunt appraisal of a student's work will help them to grow as artists, so if the work is bad, they say so, sometimes quite harshly. Still others take an oppositional approach intended to spur students into action: if the student's work is large, they say it should be small; if colorful, they say it should be monochromatic; if smooth, they say it should be textured...and so on.

Evaluation is crucial in any academic area, and in the visual arts this includes providing a substantive diagnosis of the strengths and weaknesses of the student's work. However, this should occur without resorting to needlessly destructive or disheartening negativity. This is not to say that assessment should be sugar-coated, but it should also not be an exercise in oppositional contrarianism. The primary goal of any assessment—including critique—should be an evaluation of a student's learning relative to a given academic task.

## Feedback

Verbal feedback regularly occurs in the studio as instructors guide their students' creative process. Beginning feedback with a positive comment sets a constructive tone for the rest of the instructor's remarks and allows the student to accept the rest of your evaluative statements without immediately becoming defensive or demoralized. Admittedly, this seems contrary to many instructors' natural inclinations: our trained eyes typically spot all of the student's errors, flaws, or problems first, and it's very tempting to begin our comments by addressing those deficits. The problem with this approach is that students naturally focus on the first thing you say. When this is negative, they can easily become discouraged.

This is certainly not to suggest that art instructors should give every student a metaphorical pat on the head and an insincere, "Good job!" Feedback *should* be fair and honest, and if the work needs improvement, the student should be informed of this. However, very few student works are so terrible that no redeeming feature or successful attribute is identifiable.

High-quality feedback should include three components:

1. Recognize Success
2. Suggest Improvement
3. Personal Connection

## Recognize Success

Whether or not a student's work was successful overall, your comments should begin with a statement recognizing something that was aesthetically, technically, or compositionally successful in comparison to the entire project. In other words, what is the *best thing* you notice about the student's work? If you

genuinely cannot identify anything the student did well, it's still possible to recognize the student's effort or the fact that they met a given criterion for the assignment, even if their execution of this requirement was merely adequate.

### **Suggest Improvement**

Realistically, many student artworks will demonstrate several areas in need of improvement. The way you address this in your comments can allow students to receive your criticism with open minds and to implement your feedback to make their artworks better. Phrasing your recognition of the flaws in their work as suggestions for improvement rather than highlighting their failures makes a significant difference in the way your comments will be perceived.

It's also important not to overwhelm students with negativity. Even if you can identify dozens of flaws in the artwork, you should try to limit your suggestions to less than five, at most. This might require a second meeting with the student to re-evaluate the work after he or she implements the recommended changes, making further suggestions for improvement at that point. Furthermore, if the students' work is noticeably deficient in some area, best educational practice would be to provide guided instruction in the particular skill or concept with which they're struggling.

### **Personal Connection**

Just as the beginning of your feedback sets the tone for what follows, the way you choose to end your comments will affect how the student perceives this interaction. You might consider asking the student a question about their experience in creating the work. You could share an anecdote or make a personal connection related to the work. Or you could offer some advice about how the student could implement your suggestions, such as helpful resources or an offer to work with the student one-on-one in order to rectify the problem.

Students should leave this meeting with a sense that you believe in their ability to succeed, that you respect them as individuals even if their work was not entirely successful, and that you will support their efforts towards becoming better artists.

### **Example**

The following photo was submitted as part of an assignment in a photojournalism course. Students were instructed to find a community event being held at night or under other challenging lighting conditions, to shoot a series of images conveying a journalistic story about the event, and to select five images for critique, each of which was to be accompanied by a cutline in the style recommended by the Associated Press.



This image has quite a few problems:

- the composition is poor
- there's significant glare from the windows in the back of the room and from the student's flash on the shiny items in the foreground
- the focus is not sharp
- a person on the right side of the frame is cut in half
- one of the most prominent people in the shot is turned away from the camera
- the student chose to portray a family party rather than a newsworthy community event
- the student did not include the required cutline, choosing to title the image with the first names of some of the people in the photographs

Therefore, the image did not meet the assignment criteria as well as being a poor photograph.

Finding something positive to say about this image is not easy. However, looking more closely at the image reveals a few areas of strength as well as ways the student could improve as a photographer.

Here's the feedback example:

*(1) You really captured a great expression on the face of the man in the gray shirt. It helps your photo tell the story of the event by showing us that the people at the party were having a good time. (2) However, there are a few areas where your image could be improved. If you positioned yourself so that you weren't shooting towards the bright windows in the background, it would*

*help you to minimize the glare. I'd also recommend tilting your flash up towards the ceiling to soften the impact of your flash. Next, I noticed that the people on the left side of the image, especially the woman in the striped dress, distract from the story you're trying to convey. Cropping the photo to feature the smiling man and the guest of honor could improve the composition by eliminating those distractions and drawing the viewer's attention to the important parts of your subject. Finally, I want to remind you that your choice of subject for this assignment did not meet the criteria you were given, since family parties aren't normally covered by a local newspaper. You did not provide the required cutline for your photographs, either. (3) I know that it's challenging to learn how to approach subjects like a photojournalist—it's a big change from the way you've probably photographed events in the past. Trying to work within a crowded environment and under low lighting conditions also presented you with some difficulties during this shoot. On future assignments for this class, selecting a less personal subject will help to increase your objectivity and allow you to see the subject with a fresh perspective, as will taking more time to set up your shots for optimal focus, lighting, and composition.*

This example starts on a note of encouragement, addresses some of the problems with the image along with specific suggestions for improvement, and provides good advice at the end. It does not overwhelm the student with negativity, nor does it sugar-coat the problems identified. Without a doubt, there's still more in this student's work in need of improvement. Those problems could be addressed separately, or in conjunction with another assignment in which these deficits might also be present. The point of feedback is to help students grow, not to undermine their self-confidence.

### **Student Self-Assessment**

Besides learning how to receive instructor feedback with an open mind and employ it constructively, students should become adept in assessing their own work. We can teach this through a simple mnemonic device: LBNT.

LB stands for "Like Best": what does the student like best about his or her work of art?

NT stands for "Next Time": what would the student do differently the next time?

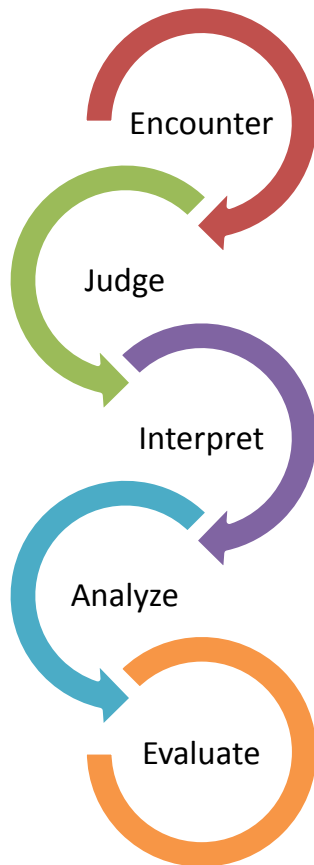
Again, we're focusing on the positive and on identifying actionable steps for improvement, rather than making a list of flaws. Students often know the shortcomings of their work quite well and tend to perseverate on their mistakes, so learning how to begin with a statement about what they like best—what's the most successful aspect of the work—sets a constructive tone for the conversation. Similarly, couching discussion of errors in terms of what the student would choose to do differently the next time turns the conversation into a learning experience rather than a fault-finding exercise.

This is a useful strategy in other instructional contexts, too. During group critique, the instructor can steer the group's discussion by asking the student whose work is under consideration, "What do you like best about this work?" and "What would you do differently the next time?" Written self-assessment assignments can also be structured around these two operative principles. It's simple, easy to remember, and effective.

Instructors can think of their own feedback in terms of LBNT+. What did you like best about the student's work? What would you recommend the student do differently next time? Plus, what other words of encouragement or advice could you share with the student?

## A New Model for Critique

For many years, critique in the visual arts has followed a basic formula featuring three key components. A viewer is first asked to identify the work, then to describe it, and finally to interpret it, attempting to hold judgment in abeyance until the process is nearly complete. Of course, there are many variations on this theme, but the basic principles remain the same.



Research into the ways people form judgments and evaluations about what they see led to the formulation of a new model offering a more intuitive approach to critique. It takes into account the fact that human beings tend to form nearly instantaneous judgments about what they see, but it also recognizes that the viewer can revise or even reverse his or her initial opinion by studying an artwork more closely.

The first step of this new model is Encounter, in which the audience sees a work of art. This stage of critique is very brief. Almost instantaneously, the audience chooses to pay attention to the work or to disregard it; either glancing at the work and then turning their eyes elsewhere or continuing to look.

Following closely on the heels of the initial encounter is Judgment. If we remain engaged with the artwork after the initial encounter, we tend to make an immediate decision about whether we're interested and/or whether we like or dislike the work. Our reaction is spontaneous and qualitative, based on our prior knowledge, experience, and individual personality or taste. It is emotional and intuitive, not logical or rational.

The steps of Encounter and Judge in the new critique model make sense: we encounter visual objects and judge what we see thousands of times a day. Even in a place where we expect to pay close attention to what we're looking at, such as in a museum, we tend to scan over things very quickly. We pass judgment on them (Do I like it? Does it interest me?), and we simply move on if the answer to those questions is, "No."

If we decide to keep looking, we move on to the phase of Interpretation. Here we make intuitive connections between the artwork and our personal experience or prior knowledge. These connections

allow us to identify the work and perceive its message or meaning. However, if we have no prior knowledge or experience, interpretation fails—we cannot understand the artwork or perceive the artist’s message if we cannot understand what we’re looking at.

Once we think we understand the artwork and have discerned its meaning, we refine our judgment and interpretation by looking more closely. This is where Analysis comes in. At this stage of the process intellect is engaged, emotion is scaled back, and we can consider external data and information linked to the artwork such as reading any accompanying materials like captions, titles, or an artist’s statement, or even by engaging in research about the work to enhance comprehension. Analysis of an artwork can reveal new depths of meaning that were not immediately visible in the work itself, or it can provide additional knowledge that allows us to understand the work more fully.

The last step is Evaluation, which typically takes more time than prior levels of the critique process. Although judgment is an immediate and emotional reaction to the artwork, evaluation is the intellectual, deliberate formation of an informed, rational opinion. As the result of interpretation and analysis, evaluation may contradict judgment: what we first perceived negatively may receive a positive evaluation or vice-versa.

Recognizing that it’s merely human nature to make quick judgments about what we see, and working within this process rather than against it, allows this new model to proceed in a more intuitive, less artificial manner than traditional methods of critique, leading the viewer from an immediate emotional response to a reasoned evaluation.

### **Applicability to Group Critique in the Studio Art Classroom**

As with any skill for which we hold our students accountable, we must deliver direct instruction in the behavioral norms expected during critique. These include:

1. Comments should address the work of art, not the artist.
2. Every evaluative statement should be accompanied by a rationale:  
“\_\_\_ [aspect of the work] was \_\_\_ [good/bad/other value judgment] because \_\_\_ [rationale or criterion]”
3. Use the vocabulary of art whenever possible.
4. Lead with a positive statement before offering a negative criticism. “I liked \_\_\_ because \_\_\_, but I don’t think that \_\_\_ was as successful because \_\_\_.”

Once students have been informed of these expectations, it is the instructor’s responsibility to hold them accountable. Students engaging in personal criticism, excessive negativity, or inappropriate behavior should not be allowed to sabotage the critique.

### ***Encounter and Judge***

In an instructional context, the Encounter step is somewhat arbitrary—we encounter the work because it’s a particular student’s turn to present during critique. Judge, however, still happens immediately. Instructors quickly recognize whether artworks are good or not, based upon years of experience and finely-refined sensibilities in their area of specialization.

Students are easily swayed by the instructor's opinion, and if they know what you think of the work, they will tend to agree with you rather than making their own judgments. Therefore, a key to leading a successful critique is to refrain from communicating your initial judgment to students. Of course, each person viewing the work will judge it as soon as they see it, but we want to wait until we fully pursue the process before making our own evaluative statements.

### *Interpret*

When critiquing a work of art in a museum or gallery, the audience is able to interpret the work as they see fit; however, the step of Interpretation is necessarily different when the artist is present. In both cases audience members form impressions, personal connections, or determine the message they feel the work conveys, but in a studio art critique the artist can confirm or refute these conclusions. Interpretation therefore becomes a more interactive experience, and the creation of meaning a shared event.

### *Analyze*

Analysis may require a higher degree of instructor facilitation than the other steps of critique. We might ask students open-ended questions about the presence or absence of any of the elements and principles of art. We can employ the LBNT strategy discussed in the previous section. We could ask the artist why he or she made a particular compositional choice or employed a given artistic technique. The point is to look more deeply at the work of art and to engage in an intellectual conversation about its relative strengths or areas in need of improvement.

### *Evaluate*

For many instructors, the final step of critique is the assignment of a grade, which must remain confidential. On the other hand, receiving feedback from the group can be very valuable in helping the student grow as an artist. One method of bridging the discrepancy between privacy and feedback is to ask students to complete a peer evaluation form at the end of each presentation. (A copy of this form is included as an Appendix.) These can be submitted anonymously and allow students to express their opinions and ideas about the work.

While students complete this peer evaluation (which should only take about 5 minutes) the instructor can fill out the grading rubric for the project. Students hand their completed evaluations to the instructor, and after a quick check while the next student is setting up his or her artworks, the instructor can hand the forms directly to the student. It's important for the instructor to look through these forms prior to passing them along to ensure that comments are appropriate. Using this tool, peer feedback is almost immediate. It also provides the student with multiple perspectives about his or her work beyond the grade assigned by the instructor.

## **Distinctive Features of Art Instruction**

Teaching in the visual arts is substantively different than other academic disciplines. Most subject areas seek to impart a body of knowledge that students should carry forward. Business students learn about the business world and how to function within it. Biology students learn about the natural world and



how to conduct investigations in order to understand it more completely. History students learn about the past and how to conduct their own historical research.

In the visual arts, we also have a body of knowledge and skills we seek to impart, but we also go beyond it, seeking to equip students to go forth and do things that no one has seen before. Our task is not to teach our students how to replicate the past or to work with what is present, but how to create the future.

Furthermore, our students come to us because they are already passionate about visual art, demonstrably talented and creative, and actively pursuing opportunities to make their own unique mark on the world. Our students already have wings—our job is to teach them how to fly.

Therefore, we should consider the following philosophical positions about teaching in the visual arts:

- a) Students do not come to class for the instructor's approval—they come to see if their ideas work.
- b) For an instructor to tell students what's right or wrong, acceptable or unacceptable, is to do their thinking for them and thus limit their creativity.
- c) The instructor's primary purpose is to help students refine and enhance their own skills, talents, and ideas.
- d) Students should be empowered to take chances with their artworks, even if these run contrary to departmental norms, established aesthetics, or the instructor's expectations.
- e) The focus in a classroom should be on the student's learning, not on the instructor's teaching.

Point e) above may seem contrary to the purpose of this Guide. After all, isn't critique entirely about teaching? The answer is, No. Teaching is merely the means to the end we seek—excellence in student learning.

C.S. Lewis wrote: "As long as you notice, and have to count, the steps, you are not yet dancing but only learning to dance. A good shoe is a shoe you don't notice. Good reading becomes possible when you need not consciously think about eyes, or light, or print, or spelling."<sup>1</sup>

Although Lewis was speaking of another subject, his remarks are quite appropriate to good teaching. When we observe a highly skilled art educator leading a critique, we don't notice the instructor—we notice the high quality of interactions between students and the learning that is taking place. Student artists learn best when they are given substantive feedback that encourages rather than disheartens them; when they are provided with suggestions for improvement rather than condemnation. Our specific task in critique—whether conducted one-on-one or in a group setting—is to empower our students to become better artists.

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<sup>1</sup> C.S. Lewis (1963, reprinted 2004) *Letters to Malcolm: Chiefly on Prayer*. Harcourt, Inc. Orlando, FL

**Peer Feedback**

Name of Presenter: \_\_\_\_\_

What worked well in this presenter's artworks?

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What could be improved in this presenter's artworks?

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Which aspect of the presenter's artwork do you feel is the most successful? Why?

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