

Criticism: Helpful or Harmful?

By Penney Peirce

Criticism: the art of defining the qualities or merits of a thing; discrimination or discussion of character or quality.

The creative writing teacher marked up the short story Emily turned in at the end of the semester—and it was virtually covered with red marks! Lots of sentences were crossed out and different words inserted instead. One comment said, “This is unimaginative!” Another read, “Did you copy this from something online?” Yet another warned: “Your logic and continuity are flawed. This needs rethinking and rewriting.” Of course, Emily felt flattened, and went home to cry privately in her room. Her self-esteem had evaporated, her love

for writing was made to seem foolish, and she was generally deflated and demoralized.

This is an example of criticism that contained some potentially helpful insights but was presented in a curt, unkind way—and without any extra explanation to help Emily understand a better way to do things. Perhaps the teacher was tired of reading papers, or had upsetting personal problems. Maybe she was just egotistical, and making students feel belittled made her feel superior.

CRITICISM VS. THE “CRITIQUE”

I remember when I studied art and design in college, I was introduced to the concept of the “cri-

tique,” which was so different from the negative criticism I’d come to expect. Each professor spoke to me one-on-one and told me what was good (or interesting) about my point of view, imagination, and skill level, and in what areas I could pay more attention and refine my abilities. They might give examples of ways my creative process could expand. “This painting could use more dark-light contrast,” “This interior design plan could have a surprise element as a focus.” This was so helpful! And easy to accept and digest.

At the end of the semester before summer break, the critique with my design professor took a different turn. After giving me the assessment of present performance and what could be improved, he told me he didn’t think my heart was in it. He thought I’d been rushing through the assignments, not paying enough attention, and he was tempted to fail me. Instead, he said he was giving me a *barely*



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passing grade and I could take the summer to think about whether I wanted to continue. Wow! I’d never failed at *anything* so far. . .

This news was different from negative criticism—because it was true! And the professor had told me in a kind-hearted but impactful, real way. So instead of feeling totally flattened like Emily had, I turned inward. This was serious. I’d blown through school in my younger years, getting high marks fairly easily, but now I had to apply myself, concentrate, use my imagination, and do physically detailed work. Could I do it? I spent much of that summer stewing on this, and realized I was pursuing design because my mother said I’d be good at it. I decided design *was* interesting and I wanted to do it for *myself*—because *I* wanted it. I went back to school with renewed focus and taught myself to be disciplined. I realize now that the difficult news that professor delivered was largely responsible for me turning my life around.

“Let me never fall into the vulgar mistake of dreaming that I am persecuted whenever I am contradicted.”

Ralph Waldo Emerson

TIPS FOR HANDLING CRITICISM

Here are some things to consider when dealing with criticism:

- **Hear what’s being said with a neutral mind, as though it’s being told to someone else.** Don’t take it all the way into your private, inner sanctum and turn it into a wounding sword. Notice if you’re resisting change and feeling defensive. Why? Is there truth in what’s being said? Does the criticism lead you to a deeper issue you need to clear?
- **Don’t give negative criticism the power to tell you who you are.** You are always an amazing,



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surprising person with great potential, talent, intelligence, and heart. And yes, you can grow and improve!

- **Listen for what's useful.** Contemplate the possibility that you might benefit from doing things differently. But does the advice pertain to what you sense is next and just right for you? Run it past your intuition and common sense.



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- **Notice the energy and attitude of the person giving you the feedback.** Do you respect them? Have they earned their expertise? Are they sincere? Do they have your best interests at heart?
- **Is there any ego involved—in either them or you?** Are they like professional critics who offer negative opinions and judgments to tear down others so they can show off and feel superior? Do you feel offended or insulted by the criticism? Does it activate a desire for revenge or payback? Or do you let yourself fall into the poor me/victim stance, basically punishing *yourself*? If so, take a breath, catch yourself, and return to your natural, wonderful, simple self.

- **Is the criticism too left-brained and judgmental—focused on logic, right and wrong, or the “rules”?** How narrow-minded is the feedback? How unfair? Does it take personal creativity into consideration? Does it honor you as it's being delivered?
- **Does the critic project their own insecurities or biases onto you?** Perhaps what's said is not much about you at all; your critic may be telling you something about their own life and insecurities.
- **There is no need to defend or justify yourself.** Just acknowledge the input and say you'll think about it. Or smile, nod, and don't say anything.

“Some people talk about other people's failures with so much pleasure that you would swear they are talking about their own successes.”

Mokokoma Mokhonoana

WHEN CRITICISM BECOMES VERBAL ABUSE OR BULLYING

It's important to recognize the difference between the more positive act of criticism and the extremely harmful experience of verbal abuse. Criticism can certainly be thoughtless at times but its underlying focus is to help you improve. Verbal abuse, on the other hand, is always unkind and has the aim of hurting and belittling you. It makes you entirely wrong and the abuser entirely right.

Verbal abuse uses words and a tone of voice chosen to manipulate, intimidate, and maintain power over others. It might include insults, humiliation, ridicule, the silent treatment, and attempts to scare, isolate, and control. In today's online world, cyber-bullying is the latest form of verbal abuse. Here cowardly, insecure, irresponsible people can say the nastiest, most detrimental things from a safe distance or behind the veil of anonymity.



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If you are a verbal abuser, it's important to know that this kind of aggressive, negative, cruel language can lead to depression, hostility, or dissociation in the recipient—often part of the person's consciousness separates from the rest of their mind, and they can't recall sections of their own history. The damage to the person's self-esteem can negatively affect their ability to learn, feel safe, trust life, and develop healthy relationships and social skills.

Verbal abusers humiliate you in front of others, use sarcasm and teasing, get upset when you don't agree with them, invade your space/spy on you, try to dominate you and control your behavior, and don't want you to spend time by yourself or with family or friends. They guilt trip you, gaslight you, and make you doubt things you know are true. In addition, they're experts at playing down your feelings, insights, and personal experience, by ignoring you, ridiculing you, or calling you too sensitive or crazy.

When dealing with a verbal abuser, determine how safe you are. It's important not to engage with the abuser to defend yourself, or provoke them. Be centered, calm, and set firm boundaries. You can respond by saying things like: "I don't like it when you talk to me like that." Or, "The comment you just made doesn't work for me." Or, "If you speak to me like that again I will leave." And, you can actually leave. If you can't leave, you can find help from abuse organizations. *Day One Hotline*, for example, provides phone help.

You *can* learn the difference between healthy, valid criticism that's useful, unhealthy criticism that's tainted by ego, and full-on verbal abuse.

"The motive behind criticism often determines its validity. Those who care, criticize where necessary.

Those who envy, criticize the moment they think they have found a weak spot."

Criss Jami

Penney Peirce is an articulate and accurate clairvoyant empath, visionary, and



author of 10 books on intuition development, inner energy dynamics, expanded perception, dreamwork, and personal transformation. She coaches business and government leaders, psychologists, scientists, celebrities, and those on a spiritual path about the hidden dynamics of what makes for true success. Her books include *Transparency*, *Leap of Perception*, *Frequency*, *Be the Dreamer Not the Dream*, and *The Intuitive Way*. Her website is www.pennypeirce.com.