

how to survive  
online writing forums

by bob jacobs

# introduction

Welcome to How To Survive Online Writing Forums. This is the paper-based version of advice previously given by Bob Jacobs at [www.bobjacobs.co.uk](http://www.bobjacobs.co.uk), and now available from the Critters Bar writing forum. Bob has been using online writing forums since March 2004. During that time he has been a member of a variety of forums, and drawing upon his experience has started to capture what he hopes is good advice for others.

This guide will not make you a better writer. It's not intended to, and there are people far better qualified to do that than Bob is. The aim of this document is to help you to get the most out of online writing forums. These are generally helpful and friendly places, but sometimes things can go wrong. People sign up to them for a multitude of reasons, not always knowing what to expect. If you find the advice here useful, feel free to contact Bob and let him know. Feedback is always welcome. If you disagree with the advice given, Bob is always open to suggestions.

This is an ongoing work in progress and may be updated from time to time. The advice is provided for free. All content is copyright Bob Jacobs. You're welcome to reference it and to quote from it, but if you do, please mention the source.

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# 1 how to take a critique

## 1.1 setting realistic expectations

In an ideal world online writing forums would be full of detailed, constructive feedback, but in the real world it doesn't always work that way. That shouldn't discourage us from trying to achieve it, but we have to be realistic. When asked in discussion threads what we most want from a critique almost everyone posts something sensible in response: they talk about the need for honesty, the need for constructive criticism, the need to avoid being unnecessarily brutal, and so on. The topic comes up often, but still we see people giving positive critiques of poor work or vague unhelpful critiques. In addition to understanding the need for tact and honesty and detail, I think there's a need to set the expectations of the author or critique recipient. What can we expect when we post our work and how should we handle the responses?

## 1.2 understanding who we're dealing with

One thing we must consider at the start is that many online writing forums perform no selection when admitting members. What this means is that they end up with a membership with a wide spread of ages, geographic locations, cultural and educational backgrounds. The writing experience of this mix of members can be equally as broad. Often, many members will be experiencing their first online workshopping, having never written before, or perhaps having written but never having received any feedback except from friends and family. Even among the more experienced members the nature of their experience may vary widely and their interests and preferences - genre, style and so on - will differ. With this in mind, when we post something for critique we have to consider how to handle the responses.

## 1.3 empty feedback

Some of the feedback (perhaps much of it) may be absolutely useless in terms of identifying what is good or bad about the piece of work. It will often be well-meaning but contain no information, for example, "Wow, I really liked this, good job," or, "This didn't work for me."

It's nice to know what people thought of our work at this level, but it doesn't contain enough detail about why someone liked our story or why it didn't work for them so we can't learn anything from it. Still, we as authors should appreciate the time the person took to read and then comment on what we've written.

## 1.4 negative feedback

Some of the feedback will be expressed in negative terms, possibly balanced with some positive comments, possibly not. We have to get used to the idea that when people critique our work we'll attract negative comments. We all have to accept this, even if we've been writing for a while. Hopefully the negative comments will be about the writing and not the author. In some cases the comments may indeed be about the author. It happens. We know that a good critique should be about the writing, but we must train ourselves so that when we receive criticism we do not take it personally (even if it is personal!)

## 1.5 poor feedback

Some of the feedback may be from people with less experience than ourselves. What else should we expect? That's the nature of online forums. Still, if the feedback is useful we should be grateful, and if it's not we should still be grateful for the time taken and the effort made.

## 1.6 conflicting feedback

As the author, we get to decide which comments to take on board and which to ignore. We have ownership of our work and we can change it in any way we like. If we disagree with some of the comments we can simply ignore them, with no disrespect to the person who wrote them. It's common to find that different people will post conflicting and contradictory comments. Which comments should we listen to? Whichever suits us. It might come down to who made them, how we see our story developing, or some other reason, but we must expect that opinions will differ and therefore some we'll disagree with.

## 1.7 waiting until the results are in

Even if the first critique our story attracts is long and detailed and useful, it's a good idea to wait until we've had several critiques before we start revising our work. Sometimes the first two or three critiques will be of the same or similar nature, whether positive or negative, and might appear to point us in one direction, but when the next critique arrives, if it differs from the others we might reconsider how to revise our work.

## 1.8 being grateful

All of this is about how we, as writers, respond to critiques of our work (and sometimes the work of others). In an ideal world all critiques would be excellent, but that isn't realistic and we can't enforce it, so we have to train ourselves to deal with whatever we get. We know we'll get a whole range of good and bad critiques. No matter what is written about our work we should always be grateful that someone took the time.

## 2 how to write a critique

### 2.1 don't worry

If you're new to participating in writing forums, the thought of posting your opinion of someone else's work can be daunting to begin with, particularly if your own writing experience is limited. You may wonder whether you should be commenting at all and lack the confidence to do so. You shouldn't worry. Remember that almost everyone you meet in writing forums will have been in the same position as you when they first started. Below are some general tips to help you write constructive critiques. They're not a blueprint, you still have to analyse the text yourself and decide what you want to say about it, but they should help to guide you towards making your comments useful.

### 2.2 be honest

The first point is perhaps one of the most important. Be honest. More than anything else, what we look for when we post work is honest opinions. Why would you post comments that are not honest? The pressure to do so comes from two areas. The first is your personal relationship with the person whose work you're reading. If you're friends with the person you might shy away from criticism for fear of affecting your relationship, whereas if the person is unknown to you it's much easier to be honest. The second pressure comes from reading the feedback that others have posted and realising that your opinion is contrary to what others have said. In both cases you should resist the temptation to be influenced and post your honest opinion.

Being honest doesn't mean being brutally honest. Brutality and honesty are two different things and don't have to go together. In fact, if you're brutally honest, the chances are that the brutality will turn the author off and the points you're trying to make will be lost.

What if you're wrong? Well, that's fine. It's okay to be wrong. Engage in discussion with those whose opinion disagrees with yours and see if you can come to agreement as to who is wrong and why, but don't lose any sleep over it. Sometimes you have to agree to disagree.

Workshopping is a learning process, we gain from writing critiques just as we do from

receiving them, and it's quite likely that after you've been workshopping for some time you'll be critical of your own early comments.

## 2.3 be specific

It's important to give the person whose work you're reading enough information to be able to benefit from your comments, whether they're positive or negative. Wherever possible, if your comments are not self-explanatory - and remember that you're often addressing novice writers - you should support your comments with direct quotations from the text. How much text you use is up to you, but it should be enough to make the point clearly so that the author can understand what you're trying to say and how to apply your comments to the story.

## 2.4 comment on the writing, not the author

Always refrain from commenting on the author. Your comments should reflect the text you're reading, not the person who wrote them. Don't be tempted to make claims about what the author intended, what the author must have meant, or why the author will never amount to anything. At the same time, don't make claims about the author's ability. Telling someone their story is the best thing you've ever read, or that they're the next [*insert name of favourite author here*] is not going to help anyone. Comment on the text, and only on the text. Whether you think it's good or bad, quote directly from the text and explain why.

## 2.5 avoiding hurt feelings

Of course, if you're commenting on the text and not the author, if you're posting specific comments supported by direct quotations from the text, and if you're being honest, there should be no reason for the author to feel hurt. Trust me. It will happen.

What should you do? Probably nothing. As writers we all need to get used to taking criticism. You, as someone who writes a critique, are not responsible for the sensitivity of the author. By all means try to find some positive points and treat them just as you do negative points: be honest, be specific, and support your comments with direct quotation. But don't feel you have to go to extraordinary lengths to avoid hurting the author's feelings, to the point where your feedback loses its usefulness. If the text is poor your comments will reflect that, and many

people using writing forums are beginners whose writing is poor. Avoid being unkind, but remember that you're doing them a favour by reading and commenting on their story.

As the author, they have ownership of their story. They're the boss. They will decide which comments to accept and which to ignore. They may choose to ignore all of your comments when they come to revise. Don't worry about it. Typically a story will receive varied comments, often contradictory, and the poor author has to somehow work out which to consider. It's entirely up to the owner of the piece to decide which way the story should go, and therefore which comments are most helpful. If your comments are ignored it doesn't necessarily mean your critique was unhelpful or wrong. Besides, others may read your comments and benefit from them.

## 2.6 overwhelming the author

For a novice writer, receiving a 5,000 word critique of a 1,000 word story pointing out the multitude of errors can be overwhelming. You may indeed come across writing that is poor in almost all (or even all) areas. Try to focus on those areas that stand out most as needing improvement. Don't focus on large numbers of grammatical errors if the whole section you're commenting on needs a total rewrite. By the time it's rewritten the corrections may no longer apply.

## 2.7 learning the craft

Clearly, your ability to critique will improve with experience. The better you are as a writer, the more you know, the better able you'll be to help others. It takes time. It takes effort. If you're serious about writing you should spend time learning the craft. You won't learn it all from online writing forums. Read a lot of varied fiction. Read craft books and articles. Discuss craft with other writers. Write plenty. Don't worry too much about the quality of your stories. Much of what we write as novices embarrasses us later. That's fine. Learn about capturing your reader in the opening, how to create believable characters and plots, how to write convincing dialogue, and so on. It won't happen overnight, but if you work at it, it'll come.

## 3 before you post your story

### 3.1 brace yourself

Before you post something for critique, think about what you expect to happen. This is important, because once you hit the submit button you're no longer in control of the process. You're submitting your work to the opinions of a whole range of people, from friends who may already be familiar with you and your writing to strangers who haven't even signed up to the forum yet. Consider the advice on *how to take a critique*. Adopt the right mental attitude before you start. Some of the feedback may be useful, some of it may not. Some of it may be tactful, some of it may not. Accept that you have no control over the response you're about to receive, and that you're ready to filter the bad from the good and not worry about it.

### 3.2 post your second draft

Don't post your first draft. What I mean by that is make it as good as you possibly can before posting. Don't post writing that you know is sloppy or poor. If you know there are issues with the grammar, and you know what they are, fix them first. If you know that spelling isn't your strong point, run it through a spell checker first or ask someone to check it for you.

Proof read. Go through your writing at least once, and preferably a couple of times, making sure that obvious errors are caught and corrected.

Can't you just post it anyway and let the people reading it pick up on the problems? Well think about it. You don't need a dozen people to tell you things that you already know are wrong or can find yourself. You want people to focus on identifying things that you can't see for yourself. That's where the real benefit to you comes. Besides, it can be distracting for the person reading your writing if it's full of minor issues that could have been corrected. It can give an overall poor impression of your writing, too. Give them the freedom to read the best work you can produce, and let them look for those areas that most need to be addressed.

### 3.3 invite your ears

Anyone who has submitted work to a competition or magazine knows that within five minutes of sending it you'll spot something that is blindingly obvious, even though you read your work a thousand times before sending. Your eyes can play tricks on you. Sometimes you see what you expect to see, not what's actually written. Invite your ears along to the party. Read it aloud. It's surprising how many things you can pick up by reading something aloud rather than reading it in your mind. No doubt there's an explanation, something to do with how the brain works. If there is, I don't know it, but I do know that reading something aloud helps to identify problems.

If you have text-to-speech software on your computer, use it. Run your writing through it and take on the role of listener. As with reading it aloud yourself, this can often identify problems. You don't need to do this until you've already fixed as much as you can for yourself, but it's worth doing.

### 3.4 take your time

Don't rush to post your work. Take the time you need to check for errors and to correct it. Sometimes it can help to get away from the writing for a short time, whether for just a couple of hours or a couple of days. Give yourself some distance. Come back to it fresh in a few hours or days and check it again, and you will see things that you didn't spot before.

### 3.5 consider your audience

If you've just written a great piece of romance, watch out for the science fiction buffs. Consider who your story is aimed at. Will someone who reads historical crime thrillers appreciate your edgy literary fiction? If you have a target audience in mind, be careful about the comments you receive from those outside of it. Writing styles and conventions differ between genre. What's good for Mills and Boon might not be right for your space opera. Know your genre, if you can. Know what the genre expectations are. Before posting, know who your target audience is.

## 3.6 check the presentation

Consider how your writing will look on the screen to those reading it. Make it presentable. Some people are put off reading a story if the writing is poorly formatted.

What makes good on-screen presentation is not necessarily the same as what looks good on paper. Typically, it's a good idea to put a blank line between paragraphs for screen reading, which can be achieved by an extra press of the return key at the end of the paragraph. Often the default font size, style and colour will be fine and perfectly readable. Try to avoid overdoing the use of bold, italic or underlined text, and fancy or coloured fonts. These can make the writing appear messy. Often you can achieve the emphasis you're after by using better word choices in your writing rather than special font effects. You want the person reading it to focus on the story itself, not the presentation.

If you're pasting your story into the forum software from Microsoft Word or something similar, you'll probably lose all of the formatting - the bold, italics and so on. Paste plain text, then format using the options available with the forum software.

If the forum software provides a preview option, use it to check the presentation before finally submitting.

## 3.7 take ownership of the physical story

Just as you have ownership of the writing, the actual story content, you also have ownership of the physical story. Keep a backup of your work somewhere safe. Don't assume that the forum is automatically responsible for keeping backups of your work. If the only copy you have is stored in the forum database, you're gambling. You've put hours of effort into your story, perhaps even days or weeks or longer, so don't leave ownership of it to a forum. Web servers crash. Hard drives fail. Databases corrupt. Wars happen. Humans are imperfect and at times unreliable. Keep a copy of your work somewhere safe, preferably more than one copy in more than one place.

If possible, avoid typing your story directly into the forum post. Create a document using your favourite text editor and store it electronically. You can copy and paste it into the forum post. It's not unknown for a server to become unavailable between starting your post and hitting the

submit button. Sometimes hitting the browser back button will recover it, if you're lucky. If you've just typed it all in and have no other copy, you could lose the lot.

## about the author

Bob lives in the south-east of England with his wife and kids and Sony Vaio. His background covers avionics, medical systems and the automotive industry. He currently works as a software developer.

Bob began writing fiction in 2004 when he signed up to the Short Stories Uncut forum hosted on the East of the Web site. When that forum closed in 2006, Bob set up the Critters Bar forum. Critters Bar is still going and new members are always welcome at:

<http://www.crittersbar.com>

He is also a member of the Goldfish Bowl writing group that meets regularly in Kent.

Bob has placed 3rd in the Milton Keynes Speakeasy writing competition, and has also placed 2nd and 1st in the Jacqui Bennett Writers Bureau (JBWB) quarterly writing competitions. His work has appeared online at Skive Magazine, Blue Almond, Backhand Stories, Defenestration, The Pygmy Giant, Six Sentences, Dogzplot Flash Fiction, DiddleDog Flash Fiction and Thieves Jargon.

Bob is currently writing his first novel (who isn't?) due for completion at the end of 2010.