

How To give An Effective Critique; Suggestions And Guidelines

There are many types of critique, ranging from informal sharing of opinions, ideas, etc. to formal in-depth expert assessment. In all cases, the effectiveness of the critique is dependent upon using good communication skills. Communication is the foundation upon which an effective critique is built.

Content can only be clear when all parties understand basic concepts and vocabulary. The person giving the critique should be aware of the knowledge level of the person receiving the critique and describe ideas with sufficient detail to ensure understanding. Also, as the effective sharing of information is dependent on the feelings and emotions between two people, the critic needs to be cognizant of what can be done to ensure a positive tone in the interaction. Following is a list of suggestions to consider when you are providing critique:

1. Show respect for the work. This begins with taking sufficient time to examine the object being evaluated. Critiques based on a cursory examination often lead to an incomplete understanding but most importantly, the creator of the work may feel diminished and therefore not open to suggestions that may be presented. Work that is held carefully and examined from all angles and even “caressed” makes the creator feel like the critic is involved and is seeking to understand the work. This makes it easier to accept suggestions without getting hurt feelings. We recommend that critics always handle turned art like they would a sacred object. You can’t go wrong if you visualize how most people look when they hold a newborn child.
2. Manage the content of the critique. First, consider the type of information you communicate. It generally works best to provide compliments as well as suggestions for improvement. As it seems that many people consider all suggestions for improvement as negative, it may be good to begin with an assessment of the positive attributes of the piece. In cases where there are not a lot of positive aspects, the reviewer can verbally describe the attributes of the piece. A statement like: “This piece reminds me of classic Japanese lacquerware in form and design...” or, “The large base provides a lot of stability...” etc. Suggestions for improvement should be given in a way that is descriptive while avoiding words like, “bad”, “poor”, etc. So saying that a line has a flat portion is better than saying “poor” line. We also recommend not saying, “I don’t like...” such statements are often interpreted as a personal rejection. On some pieces it may be possible to give a long list of needed improvements. However, we have found that presenting one or two ideas is best. Selecting a few ideas that will lead to improvement will avoid overwhelming the maker with too many things to consider changing at once. Too many criticisms may also lead to hurt feelings and may cause discouragement about their work.
3. Involve the maker in the presentation of suggestions. Sometime after the critic has examined the work and provided some feedback, it is often a good idea to ask the maker about the design and production of the work. Merrill Saylan provided us with an excellent list of guidelines for talking about your work written by the painter Marcia Goldenstein. The list can easily be adapted to help turners learn how to discuss their work. the list appears at the end of this article. Asking specific questions like these, can add structure to the discussion and provide more in-depth discussion than just asking, “Tell me about this piece.”
4. Provide feedback for both execution/workmanship and artistic/aesthetic elements. How well the work is made is always important. While it is important to check all the details on how well a piece is made, it is also important to focus on the issues that have the greatest impact for improvement. Too much information is usually not helpful. In woodturning, there are only a few elements that are recurring issues. Sanding scratches, torn wood grain, and finish problems are the most prevalent. Artistic /aesthetic elements are more complicated to critique. There is wide disagreement on many of the critical concepts related to artistic values. Therefore, we suggest that the critic not state their personal opinion as fact. For

example: beginning a comment on the value of a particular design element by saying something like: “I believe a piece almost always looks more refined when the base is less than one third the diameter...” rather than, “ this base is too big...” The critic may also discuss other styles and viewpoints that may exist elsewhere regarding a design concept. The truth is There are no absolute rules regarding the artistic value of a particular work. We should not forget that there is a lot to be gained from familiarizing ourselves with the great traditions and styles that have developed. Having a knowledge of the great ideas helps us learn more about the possibilities for understanding and improvement. A review by an “expert” almost always has the potential to provide more options.

5. Anyone playing the role of critic has the potential to be useful. However, such reviewers are only as good as their knowledge base and ability to communicate clearly and positively. So, it is important for clubs and individuals to seek out or train individuals to be good critics. We have seen instances where several individuals combine their talents to do group reviews of work. In any case, because being a critic can have a significant positive or negative effect, those selected for the job should be selected with care. It is even better to have a small pool of different experts available. This ensures that more good ideas are available. Don't hesitate to critique the critic and critique process. If a certain individual does not demonstrate good skill, let them know what needs to be improved.
6. Critique should be an ongoing process. Looking at an original piece alongside of pieces created later that were changed due to feedback is a good way to teach others about technique and art. Turners should be encouraged to keep a photo file and/or examples of their work so they can clearly track their own changes and progress.
7. Manage the vocabulary issues. In some instances, the background and knowledge of the critic is different than the individuals receiving the review. So, the use of vocabulary that is unfamiliar can create confusion. David Ellsworth said, “...we don't provide them with language. What does it mean to them when we say 'search for the self in self expression?' Or ' Find your own voice?'...How can we possibly do that if we don't give them the tools to grasp the concept?'. One answer to this question is to carefully define any vocabulary terms that might be unfamiliar. Given the difficulty of doing that David Ellsworth suggests another way. He says,...When I teach design, I emphasize the process of making from the log to the finished object...Concurrent to this process of making is a students self awareness in developing a form—shifting the shoulder into a belly, raising the neck, squishing this, expanding that— so they develop their own language whereby self awareness becomes self criticism.”

In the broad sense, critique takes place when someone is asked to give opinions regarding the strengths and weaknesses of a particular object. It can be highly formal or very informal. We have presented the idea that good critique can lead to better work being produced and that poor critique can sometimes cause some long lasting problems. We hope that anyone who takes on the very important role of critic takes the time learn how to do it well. We view the above guidelines as a starting point for further discussions on improving our ability to help each other be better designer/turners.

We believe that good critique is a very effective way for turners to create better work.

poor critique can have a profound negative effect and can hold us all back from achieving our potential. Feedback should be based on widely varying points of view and knowledge derived from all the “arts”, and not as Merryll Saylan says, “Woodturner rules”. Critique should be a

frequent part of what we do as turners. Clubs can do a lot by making it a high priority activity and by taking steps to ensure that good critiques are always available.

The critique process should be thorough. Making sure to cover the basics as a starting point is usually a good idea. Form is the most basic element. Even when all other elements of a piece are without fault, a piece cannot reach its potential without a good shape. Finish elements are also important. By involving the creator of the piece in productive discussion, the potential for everyone to benefit is greatly enhanced.

GUIDELINES FOR TALKING ABOUT YOUR WORK By Marcia Goldenstein (We have substituted the word turning for painting)

Talk about what motivated the turning

Talk about your thought process in creating the turning

Talk about your choice of images(or format or stylistic approach)

Talk about your choice of formal aspects: material/color/composition

Talk about how you want the viewer to react

Were you influenced by another artist? In what way?

If the turning has some personal narrative, talk about that

How does the turning reflect who you are? What you believe? What you observe?

Did you learn anything by doing this turning? About yourself? About your skills

Are you satisfied with the turning? What, if anything, would you do differently?

Do you have any specific questions about the turning/idea that you want addressed in the critique?

David Buskell Jim Christiansen