

Learning to Critique Effectively

Goals:

Keep criticism impersonal and objective.

Avoid personal preferences and vague, generalized observations.

Think before you speak.

Be kind.

Critiquing art work is an acquired skill. Useful advice is grounded in a working knowledge of design and color theory. The more you know about these areas the better your advice becomes. However, there are basic, quantifiable qualities of good work that can be learned quickly and applied immediately.

Whether you are in a critique group, or working with one other person, there are two sets of responsibilities to acknowledge.

1. If you are seeking advice you have a responsibility to know what sort of advice you are seeking, and to begin your critique by stating intent clearly. For example, you may feel “something isn’t quite right” about a piece, but making that statement won’t get as much concrete help as analyzing the work first, and saying to the group, “something isn’t quite right and I don’t know whether it is a color problem or a balance problem.” Use the **Critique Check List** before you ask for advice, because you might be able to solve your problem without help.

If you are satisfied with aspects of the work so far, and do not want to entertain changes, say so. If work is complete and you are not open to changing anything about the piece, then it’s wise to state this also. Saying, “I just wanted to show you what I’ve finished.” is enough said.

2. If you are offering advice or an opinion of work in progress, refer again to the goals at the top of the page. Use the **Critique Check List** to analyze work in progress. Write down observations so the artist has reminders when she returns to the studio. When you make statements about a piece, keep it straightforward, kind and questioning. Remember to address only the issues the maker has brought to the table, unless she leaves the request for advice open ended.

Words or phrases to avoid:

Should I think You ought to I don’t like
You always seem to....

When you bring work for critique, be prepared to begin by making the following statements:

- My intent in making this piece was: (fill in the blank. For fun. To explore balance, to get into a show, to make a piece for sale, to play around with color)
- I would like feedback concerning: (This is where you get specific about the help you want.)
- Optional: You may add: I am already satisfied with (fill in the blank) so we don't need to address that issue.

It's important to be clear about your motivation when you bring work to a critique group. It's one thing to want to share the satisfaction of completing work so that the group can celebrate with you. It's another thing to come knowing that you need assistance in solving a design or color problem.

You don't have to go to art school to get a grip on fundamental design information. You don't even have to understand the fundamentals completely to be able to use them as a guide to why a composition may or may not be working. Design issues can be broken down into four basic categories. Work through the categories to determine where changes might be made.

Balance

Definition: Balance is the quality of arranging design elements so that no part of the composition feels too heavy or too light. If a piece is out of balance you can usually feel it intuitively because one of these responses occurs –

- your eyes keep wandering to one specific area of the composition OR
- you can't explain it, but the composition feels unbalanced. Trust this. It is design intuition working.
- OR
- Your eyes keep wandering out of the composition completely.

The Four Categories:

Balance/Composition
 Contrast/Relationship
 Workmanship
 Color

If you have the above response to a work in progress when you are studying it, ask these questions:

- Is it a size issue? If one design element is bigger than the others it may throw the balance off. Perhaps a *visual bridge* is needed to link smaller elements to the bigger one, indicating a need for a medium sized element. OR a big element may be important to the overall composition, in which case...
- Placement may be the problem. Could the element be moved within the composition in order to achieve better balance?
- Is the placement leading the eye out of the composition? Design elements placed too close to an edge have this potential. Repositioning them may bring the composition into balance.
- Another placement issue: The bull's eye. In general it is not a good idea to place an important design element right in the middle of the composition. That position is static and affects the flow of everything around it. It is reserved for artwork that is created intentionally to encourage centering or meditation.

Contrast/Relationship

Definition: If balance is the bare bones structure of a composition, then contrast and relationship are the meaty keys to providing interest and depth to work. Without contrast, a surface is dull and uninteresting. Ignore the value to relationship among the design parts and the piece may veer into visual chaos. When contrast and relationship work together a surface is integrated and visually entertaining.

Contrast is provided by the following elements. Evaluate a piece by determining which elements are at work on the surface:

Size: small, medium and large elements

Shape: straight lines versus curves, squares versus circles, and in more sophisticated compositions, shapes referenced from a broader relational vantage point. For example – straight up and down stalks of grain in a field, with rounded, billowing clouds in the sky above the field.

NOTE: We analyze compositions in a rarefied atmosphere. It is never as simple as only one thing going on, as only one contrasting element at work. Taking a composition apart, element by element, is done because it allows us to see more clearly what works and what doesn't work, from a design standpoint. Then we can put the composition back together again and make it stronger by adding elements that make it stronger or eliminating detractors to compositional strength.

Texture: Either real contrasting texture – like combining velvet with satin. Or *faux* texture – printed burlap pattern on a matte fabric, for example.

Color: If more than one color is used, color provides contrast. Color contrasts work best when they follow color theory guidelines. Some contrasting color combinations are complementary colors, analogous colors, triads (Three apart on a basic color wheel like red, yellow, blue or green, purple and orange) Split complements, etc.

Value: One color altered by adding white (tint) gray (tone) or black (shade)
Contrasting values of one color can imply distance or dimensionality.

Stylistic: There are hundreds of different styles of design elements or images. Arts and Crafts, Art Deco, Victorian, Photographic, hand-crafted, and ethnic (of which there are hundreds of permutations) are examples of clear cut, specific *styles*. Contrasting the style of design elements can throw a composition off completely, but if handled deftly, stylistic differences add richness and variety to a composition.

Theme: Within a chosen theme, design elements contrast to add interest to the visual *storyline*. For instance, if the chosen theme is “China” the artist may combine a topographical map of China as a screened background, followed by two printed fan images in two values of red. The Chinese character for “fan” completes the piece - printed in textile paint and also gold foil. The different media (dye, paint and foil) chosen for printing provide contrast. Thematic contrast is derived from the combination of individual elements – the fans, the map and the character.

Relationship is another way of thinking about a classic design term – unity. Building relationship on a surface integrates the surface so that all of the parts hang together. Building relationship unifies the surface. As is true of most naturally occurring principles (Things dictated by Nature over which we have no control) there is an elegance in the interplay of contrast and relationship. The very elements that provide contrast within a composition also build relationship! They are:

Size. A series of small, medium or large elements can be combined to build relationship.

Color: The artist chooses clear and specific color combinations as a means of building and supporting color relationships within a composition.

Value: Deliberately ordering light, medium and dark value generates a specific kind of relationship capable of implying distance or contour.

Texture: Repeating texture – either real texture or *faux* printed texture adds interest and supports relationship

Shape: Relationship is as simple as using small, medium and large circles. Generate additional relationships by combining solid circles, open rings and spirals. Script complex visual relationships by combining images that reference similar shapes, without being exactly *the same shape*. A classic example? The curvature of the reclining female form, paired with a landscape of rolling hills.

Stylistic: Relationship is generated by pairing different design elements, each of which is stylistically similar. For example, rather than choosing a variety of fonts all of which reference one letter, the artist may use one font, but numerous letters of the alphabet. The fact that every letter is **Marker felt**, **Jazz LET**, or Ariel, is the thread of relationship that holds the elements together. Choosing a series of art deco design elements and combining them within one composition is another example of building stylistic relationship.

Thematic: The example used to demonstrate contrast can also be used as an example of relationship within a theme. The Chinese topographical map, fans and Chinese characters are distinct design elements, but each supports and builds the theme.

Workmanship

Definition: The level of skill, care, and attention to detail demonstrated in the execution of the work. Whether beginner or more advanced artist, the level of care taken in the *making* speaks volumes. Strive to do your best work and be willing to rip, wash out and redo, if an improvement might be made.

Quantifiable aspects of workmanship vary based on the techniques and media used. In general, smooth seams, neatly finished edges and clipped threads demonstrate attention to detail on a stitched piece. (Although there are always exceptions based on the *intent* of the maker!) Cleanly printed images and stable dyes are examples of attention to detail on a printed piece.

Framing should be appropriate and from quality materials.

Color

Definition: Color relationships are also quantifiable and are described in simple terms in a variety of resource materials. Every color should play a role in moving a composition toward resolution and integration. The use of particular colors or color combinations should make sense and be grounded in basic color theory. On a deeper level, color choices support the theme developed in a composition and this symbolic role should not be underestimated.

Only you know why you are working. And sometimes you don't know! A critique group is only as good as the dispassionate, helpful advice it is capable of offering. Strive to learn as much as you can about design and color and spend some time in a museum or gallery, analyzing what works, and what doesn't work. Look at old work of your own and try to be objective about its strengths and weaknesses. When you offer an opinion about someone else's work, think carefully about why you think what you are about to say. Be able to defend your opinion if you intend to share it.

Begin statements with:

Have you considered....

Let's look at the _____ for a minute. (colors, values, shapes, etc.)

What if.....

Would it be stronger if.....