

The Art of Self-Critique

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Learning how to critique your own work lets you coach yourself to better paintings without being overly dependent on outside praise, or devastated by criticism. This guide will help you examine different aspects of your work and allow you to learn from each piece in a way that will help you figure out what step to take, what experiment you want to try or what direction you want to move next.

When to Critique

Don't attempt to critique your work immediately after painting. Allow some time to elapse so you can view the work more objectively. If you've struggled in the painting, the emotions you've attached to the painting might be primarily negative, and you may be unable to see the strengths in the painting. Likewise, if you are proud of what the painting signifies, you might not be able to see problem areas.

I like to analyze a painting after 24 hours, again after several days, and again after several weeks. It's amazing the difference time can make in your perspective on a painting! For example, think of a painting from several years ago that was the best thing you had achieved to that date. After years of continued painting and growing skill, you probably don't see it as the masterpiece you did back then! Vice versa, you may see that a piece you were disappointed in at the moment because it didn't match the idea in your head has great merit once you get some distance and time away.

About this Guide

Don't use this entire checklist for every painting. Rather, choose a section of the guide and analyze your painting based on that section. Use this list as a guideline for thinking critically about your work.

Above all, remember:

- If your painting is working as a whole, ***small mistakes do not matter***. By evaluating the entire painting, you set aside criticism of the little things that only the artist sees and consider the big picture. That's why we call it the "big picture!"
- ***Emotion is more important than perfection***. No one cares about the mistakes; they care about how your art makes them feel.

First Impressions

I like to set up my finished painting across the room so it's the first thing I see when I enter the room. If I can allow a day or two to pass before I enter that room and see it, I have the opportunity to analyze my first impressions, which hold both a visual and emotional response to the painting.

I look for that first impression to answer these questions:

- How does this painting make me feel? What's my immediate impression upon seeing it at first glance from across the room?
- What part of the painting do I look at first? Where is my eye instantly drawn?
- Where do I look next? How does my gaze travel through the painting?
- Do I start at the focal point and then return there after viewing the rest of the painting?
- Does my eye keep getting drawn back to a non-focal-point element?

Working Methods

- What part of this painting felt most difficult?
- What was the easiest?
- Did you struggle with overworking, or is there a possibility you held back from continuing because you were scared of making a mistake?
- What stage of the painting is most comfortable for you?

Preparation

- Did you prepare for your painting by doing value studies, thumbnails, or have you painted this subject before?
- Would more preparation have changed your decision making process (for example, did you paint the background at the end of the painting rather than planning your background from the beginning)?
- Could your painting benefit from a simpler approach, editing out excess details?

Expression

- What did you feel as you painted? Did negative self-talk or feelings of pressure to excel influence the mood of your painting?

Remember that it becomes easier to put self-expression and emotion in your painting as your skills improve, so a concern over style is often an indication that you need greater experience in that subject or technique. This problem is cured by practice - log more brush miles!

Composition, Value, and Contrast

- Where is the area of strongest contrast in the painting? Is it centered around the focal point?
- Convert your painting to grey-scale. Are there areas of strong contrast? If not, try darkening your darkest values, or repaint to keep the light values lighter.
- Sketch a "map" of your painting, exploring the paths the eye follows through the scene. Explore how you could adjust the values, lines and shapes to do a better job of guiding the viewer through the painting.
- Look at your painting in a mirror. Is there anything that stands out too strongly and distracts from the focal point?

Small changes make a difference! Sometimes, a single brush stroke can make all the difference. If your focal point is weak, try increasing just a small area of strong contrast

near the focal point, or pop a complementary “exclamation point” of color where you want the viewer to look first.

Your Opinion Matters!

Many artists believe that they can only get unbiased opinions about their work from others, but that's just not true. (Everyone has a bias.) That means that your opinion of your work is just as valid as anyone else's. Learning how to look at your work by walking yourself through the different aspects of your work as I've listed in this guide will increase your painting skills by leaps and bounds and is key to becoming your own favorite artist.