How to Review

By Juno Magic

1. The Reviewer's Job
1.1 Introduction

Critiques, comments, concrit, reviews, feedback – no matter what you call it, it can be a difficult job for both the critiquer and the author.

This essay is an attempt to make this difficult job easier for reviewers and authors.

In four short chapters I will try to make the process of reviewing transparent as a process of communication between critiquer and author and offer some ideas that may help to make this a positive learning experience for both the author and the reviewer.

First I will have a look at the critiquer's point of view. In the second chapter I will examine how to phrase a review so that it is most effective for both the reviewer and the author. The third and main part of the essay will of course deal with how to write and structure a good review. I will provide an outline for aspects that can be important in a thorough and detailed review, but I will also include an idea for a well-balanced short critique of only a few lines. In the last part of the essay I will turn to the author's point of view and suggest what the author can contribute to the process of critiquing and reviewing.

The essay applies to any kind of critique, no matter if it is beta-reading, critiquing within the normal archive environment á la "Leave a Comment", a review of story submissions for an archive or an award program: **whenever a critique is sent directly to the author,** this essay will hopefully be useful.

Even if the critique is written in the style of a "movie review", to recommend the story, if the critique is targeted at an audience beyond the author, many points of the essay may be helpful to compose a well-balanced critique. Of course in this case the points referring to the process of communication between critiquer and author don't always apply fully.

1. 2 The Reviewer

If, as I said, this job is so difficult for the reviewer, you may ask now, of course, "If it's really that difficult, why review at all?"

Thankfully, the answer to that question is simple: because critiquing and analysing another author's work will improve our own editing skills. We will be able to revise our own stories more easily. By helping another author, we help ourselves. Critiquing skills are also valuable in other areas of life, at school, college or university, in a job. No matter if it is homework for an English literature class, or the review of a project for the job, we have to learn to assess the quality of written material and to be able to voice our criticism in a constructive and comprehensible way.

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Therefore it makes a lot of sense in my opinion to try and learn something about the ins and outs of critiquing in an environment that is not *quite* as serious as most offline situations where those skills are called for.

Now let's start with examining what the difficult job I mentioned looks like for the critiquer:

We want to write a good critique. We don't want to hurt the author's feelings, and we may be in doubt just *how* to give good critique – a critique that covers the most important aspects of the story, a critique that is helpful for the author. We may even be worried if we are qualified to critique something at all.

In the realm of fan fiction at least, we don't have worry about our expertise. Just as no one needs to have a Ph.D. in English literature to become a writer, we also don't need one for critiquing stories. Even if the author of the story we are critiquing is a veritable Tolkien scholar, it's more than enough that we are average "Informed Readers". If we have read some books by J.R.R. Tolkien, if we have watched the movies Peter Jackson made about "The Lord of the Rings" and if we have read a number of fan fiction stories set in Tolkien's Ardaverse, we are fully qualified as reviewers.

The first thing we have to realize about reviewing is that a good critique needs to have negative critical content, but that what makes a critique a good critique, a critique that is really helpful for the author, is often the way in which we offer that critique, how we phrase our reviews.

Generally we should keep in mind that reviewing is not a game we play against *the author*. Instead, it is better to think of critiquing as a game we play together with the author as *a team* against *the story.*

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2. How to Phrase a Review

It is not only important *what* we criticize, but *how we phrase a critique*. It is very important that our critiques are not only nitpicky, accurate and comprehensive, but that they are

**thoughtful,
tactful and
polite.**

We have to remember that if we want to give constructive criticism, our comments have to *reach* the author. No matter how *right* we are about a misplaced comma, about misspelled Sindarin, about vague characterizations or "purple prose", if the author feels threatened and insulted by our comments, she won't listen to us, she won't change a thing about her story, but instead she will only get into our faces about "*flaming*" her.

Based on "The Diplomatic Critiquer" by Alan Burt, I have composed a list that contains suggestions which may be helpful to engage in a constructive and effective process of communication between critiquer and author. It should be taken as a reminder of how problems of communication and other obstacles that can be overcome to ensure a smooth and successful review process.

When we write a review:

- **We should remember that there is no perfect writing. And if we happen to be writers , too, we need to remember that our writing is not perfect, either.** There is a reason why professional writers have editors and why even novels by "Pulitzer Prize" winners get bad reviews in the press.

- We ought to obey the "Golden Rule": **Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.** For example, most people don't like to be patronized. Therefore we should be careful not patronize the author we want to *help*! No one enjoys feeling insulted and belittled. Therefore we should choose no phrases for our critiques that we would not want to read in a review about one of our own stories.

- If we feel like doing a really thorough review, we might keep in mind that it can be a good idea to *ask* the author if she is interested in that kind of feedback at all. If that is not the case, the time and effort spent on a comprehensive critique would be completely wasted.

- **We should always critique the story and not the person.** Personal remarks like: "I assume this is a first story...", "As you are not a native speaker you naturally make more mistakes...", "I think that as a teenager you don't have the experience to...", are *not helpful,* no matter if they are true or not. Those remarks are often unnecessarily hurtful. Moreover, there is *little* the author can do about many of those facts. Those remarks also don't improve the story or the relationship between the writer and the critiquer.

  However, it is very useful to have a look at the author's profile before we start writing our critique. With a little bit of information about the author we can adjust our style of

reviewing so that the author will understand us easier. If a reviewing process is established between us and the author, it is also good to ask questions, before we make assumptions about the author and her background.

- We ought to address the author by name and as "you". We have to remember that we are not an authority and that we are not the author's teacher. We are not in any way superior to the author. To find the right tone it may helpful to imagine that we are sitting in one room with the author and that we are actually talking to the author about the story in question.

- We should always write in complete sentences, and try to use correct grammar and spelling -- *especially* if we criticize the author's grammar and spelling.

- **We should give reasons for our criticism.** "*I don't like this*" or "*This is confusing*" is not helpful. Most authors are not mind-readers. We have to explain to them why something did not work for us or why we think certain aspects of a story could be improved. Therefore it is good to use the word "*because*" or phrases such as "*I would like to explain why I think this could be changed...*"

- No matter what we may have been taught at school or university about saying "*I think*" or "*In my opinion*", and words like "*maybe*" or "*perhaps*": using those words and phrases is *very* helpful if we want to reach the author.

  Why? Because all of us are much more likely to accept **polite suggestions** than to simply obey to any "*ultimate truths about writing*" we get beaten over the head with. Therefore the punctuation mark of choice in a critique is the *question mark* and not the exclamation mark.

- We should also remember that giving feedback, criticizing a story, is *not* about changing the author's style or her narrative voice. **Our critique is supposed to help that voice to ring true.**

- We ought to be careful about quoting rules and authorities. There are no firm rules for writing. Languages change. "Authorities" make mistakes, too. Instead of stating anything about writing as if it was a law of nature, we should prefer using expressions like "*Most of the time, people…*" (start a new paragraph when a new person starts speaking; use commas when...) or "*Of course measures may vary, but if you go by the Chicago Manual of Style (Merriam-Webster etc.)*".

- We shouldn't just tell the author "*This is wrong.*" We should always make concrete suggestions for improvements. We should also try to use **examples** to illustrate our point so that the author can understand easily what we want to say. The rule of "*Show, don't tell*" is true for the art of critiquing, too!

- We should always assume that the author knows what she was doing in her story. She worked out the plot and the characters and wrote the story. It is very likely that she gave some thought to the story. And even if the author has no clue about grammar or characterization, making her feel like an idiot to begin with, is probably not going to improve the story.

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- We should not assume that what we think is correct. Before we criticize spelling or grammar, it does make sense to consult a dictionary. Before criticizing canon errors it does make sense to look up the "facts". If a story is labelled as AU ("Alternative Universe") criticizing canon mistakes usually does not make any sense. *At all.*

- And last but not least, we should remember that "*I don't like this*" and "*This is bad*" are **not** one and the same thing.

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3. How to Write a Review
3.1 Introduction

Just like the different ways of writing, everyone has a different way of critiquing. Everyone has a different way of reading a story for the purpose of critiquing it. Everyone has a different approach to writing that critique.

How we critique will lastly depend on what feels comfortable to each of us individually. There is no "correct" way of critiquing.

However, there *are* guidelines for writing well-balanced, thorough reviews and critiques that have proved to be helpful both online and offline, for amateurs as well as for professional writers. In fact, there are many books about revising and editing! (A list of some resources, both offline and online, to help with critiquing and editing stories can be found in chapter 5 of this essay.)

In this chapter I suggest possible structures for both comprehensive and short critiques, as well as an approach to ensure that these critiques will be well-balanced between positive impressions and negative criticism.

Before looking at a possible outline for a critique with the many different aspects that can be relevant for reviewing stories, there are certain **techniques of reviewing** that can be useful for writing a good, effective critique.

Before we start reviewing, we should take a moment and think about **bias.** Everyone has a certain bias, certain preferences; some of them we are aware of, others are so much a part of us that we don't even realize that they are there. This does not prevent us from writing a fair review, because – would a completely impersonal, completely neutral and "unbiased" review by a computer be fair? Bias is linked with empathy and understanding. It is also because of our cultural background, our preferences, indeed, because of our bias, that we can *understand* certain aspects of stories at all. However, to write a fair critique, we must not let our judgement be *clouded* by our bias and our preferences. Being aware of the fact that all of us are biased to a certain extent will help us to be careful when we review. A fair critique requires a fresh impression of the relevant story. Therefore we should also never read other reviews of the story we want to provide feedback on before we write our critique.

To achieve a **well-balanced review,** and to really reach the author, it is a good idea to use a technique that Richard Hamper calls the "sandwich" principle throughout the critique. "Sandwich" principle means that we should always work with positive and negative comments in a review. Although a critique necessarily has to contain negative criticism, normally there are also many good things that can be said about a story. To achieve a well-balanced critique there should be as many "layers" of positive comments as negative comments. It is also a good idea to start and end a critique with a positive impression about the story.

This is not "coddling" of the author's ego. If the aim of our critique is to improve the story, this technique will contribute to that aim. The author will only think about the critical points in her story if the critique is presented in a way that really gets through to her.

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Starting out on a positive note will make an author open up, will make her much more willing to listen to the negative points in a critique than reading only a list of what was wrong with her story in the critiquer's opinion. *Ending* a story on a positive note will make the author much more willing to return to the story and actually change something about it.

Even if we don't care about improving the story, writing a well-balanced review is not ego-stroking, but a question of fairness and respect for the effort the author put into writing that story.

Another technique that is useful for writing an effective critique is to begin the review with a very short **summary** of the story, of what we perceived to be the "essence" of the story. That helps to avoid misunderstandings between the reviewer and critiquer about the interpretation of the story. If we are reviewing only one chapter of a multi-chapter story, it is naturally not necessary to give a summary of the complete story. Instead we can write a few sentences about what we perceived as the point of this chapter within the story.

The critique itself should be easy to understand. It is very helpful to **quote the relevant passages** of the story that we are critiquing as we move along, so that the author will know at once what we are referring to with our comments. It is also very effective to use examples to illustrate our criticism and our suggestions. Finally, it is also important to **structure** a thorough review clearly. Especially in a long critique: Titles, enumerations, paragraphs – precise formatting of a review will help the author to understand the critique.

Keeping those techniques in mind, we can turn to a possible outline for a thorough review. This is a list of aspects that *can* be important for critiquing a story, but don't have to be. Every story is different, therefore different aspects will be important for each review. Some aspects usually apply, others may be completely useless for certain stories. A critique for a single chapter or for a short story or a drabble, in which every word has to count, follows different rules than the review of a complete novella or novel. If it is a story aimed at entertaining young readers, other aspects will be important than for a critical essay that is supposed to be read by a professional audience.

It is also never necessary to work through all those points, and there may be points that are not on this list that are extremely important for certain stories. Which aspects are really important for our review depends on the story and on our interpretation of the story.

Therefore the following outline can only serve as a *guideline* and should be applied with some flexibility.

3.2 Outline for a Thorough Critique

The following aspects may be important for writing a critique. I have phrased most of the details as questions to indicate that these aspects may be important, but don't have to be, and that some of these aspects may be an indication that something is not effective and could be improved, but that this is not always the case.

1. **Overall impressions of the story.**
    To get started it may be useful to write a short summary of our interpretation of the story

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and then to provide some overall impressions of it. If we critique only a single chapter of a long story, it can be very useful to write a few sentences about what we perceived as the point of this chapter within the whole story. What does the chapter contribute to the story? Why is the chapter at this point of the story?

We should begin and end this first paragraph our review with a positive impression of the story if that is possible.

2. **The story's opening.**
   Does the beginning of the story pull us in at once? Do we want to read more? Do we understand what the story will be about? If there is a prologue, does the prologue get your attention? Is it connected to the main story in a way that makes sense? Are there quotes at the beginning? Were they important for the story? Do they fit the story and its setting, or are they contradictory because of their context? If this is a single chapter: does the chapter take up where the last chapter left off? If not, why? Does the opening of the chapter keep your attention on the story? Do you know at once "where" you are in the story?

3. **The plot and the story line.**
   Is there a **plot**? Is the plot clear and believable? Does the story have a point? What is the point? Is there a certain problem or conflict that has to be resolved? What is this problem or conflict? Is it resolved? Or is there a good reason why it is not resolved? Does the story start and end at the right places? Do the points where the story starts and ends make sense within the story line?

   If you review a single chapter: what does the plot of chapter contribute to the plot of the story?

   Does the story have sub-plots? Are there too many sub-plots? Do they make sense? Are they useful? What do they contribute to the story?

   Are there **flashbacks**? Are they easy to identify as flashbacks? Do they make sense? What do they contribute to the story?

   Dissemination of information: does the author provide the information we need to understand the story at the right times? Did the way the information was provided make sense? Do we get the feeling of being "hit over the head" with how the information reaches us?

   How is the **pacing** of the story? Does it move too slow? Why? Does it move too quickly? Why? Does it flow smoothly? Is the flow jerky? Why? Is there a reason for that? Does the way the story flows or does not flow contribute to the effect of the story?

   Does the **formatting and the sentence structure** contributes to the flow of the story? Short or long sentences as well as short or long paragraphs change the flow of the story. How is the effect in this story?

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4. **The ending.**
Is the ending abrupt? Is the ending rushed? Do we want the story to end before it did end? Is the end satisfying? Does the end resolve the main conflict or problem of the plot? If there are conflicts and problems that are not resolved, how do we feel about that? Does it bother us? Is there an indication that these unresolved conflicts or problems might be dealt with in sequels?

If this is a single chapter of a longer story: how does the chapter end? Is there a cliff-hanger? Does the end make you want to continue reading? Do you feel that the chapter has achieved its goal? What is that goal?

5. **The setting.**
Do we get the right feeling of **time and place** for the story? Do we get that quickly or slowly? Does the way the setting is established make sense? Does it contribute to the effect of the story? How? Timing and order of events: is the story consistent? Does it make sense? Are there continuity errors?

Is there enough **description** to set the atmosphere of the story? Too much? Is the description appropriate and consistent? Do the descriptive passages transport us into the story?

How is the style of the descriptions? Is it consistent? Is it effective? Why? Does the author use too many clichés or too many exotic expressions to describe something? Do the descriptions make sense? Are they plausible?

Names of persons, plants and places: are they consistent? Do they fit the story? Do they contribute to the effect of the story? How?

6. **Conflict.**
Conflict can be defined as "the mental or moral struggle caused by incompatible desires and aims. That is the kind of conflict that makes stories come alive" (Ben Bova in "The Craft of Writing Science Fiction That Sells", quoted after Victory Crayne).

Is there conflict in the story? What **kind of conflict**? Where? Why?

Is there emotional conflict within the protagonist? Between main characters? Why? Does it make sense? Is it touching? Is it interesting? Why?

Emotions: how are emotions presented? In descriptions, actions, dialogue? Does the way emotions are presented feel real, authentic? Do we care? Or do the emotions feel hysterical, like high melodrama?

Is there enough conflict? Is there too much conflict? Why?

How is the conflict **expressed**? In action, dialogue, attitudes? Does it make sense that the conflict is expressed the way it is?

If conflict is expressed in action, do those scenes make sense? Do they contribute to the effect of the story? Why?

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Is the conflict resolved? Does the conflict and its resolution affect the characters of the story? Why? How?

7. **Characterization.**
Do the characters feel **real**? Real people can be beautiful or ugly or something in between. They have dreams and fears, worries and ambitions. They have talents and lack skills. They have habits and allergies. Are the characters too good or too bad to be true? Why? Does it make sense if they are? Does it contribute to the effect of the story if they are?

Are the facts about the characters accurate and consistent throughout the story?

Are the characters consistent throughout the story? Are the characters too consistent? Real people don't make sense all the time: paradoxes and emotional contradictions are normal. Are there such paradoxes and contradictions in the characters? Too much? Too little? Do they make sense within the story? Why?

Background: people don't exist in a vacuum. The characters must have had lives before the story starts. Real people have jobs, friends, families, pets, cars, houses, mortgages.

Do we get a sense of that? How?

The characters live in a certain place, in a certain time. They are influenced by their surroundings. Do we get information about those influences? How do we get that information? In large chunks or in small pieces? Does the way we get that information make sense? Does the way those influences are shown contribute to the story? How?

Transformation: real people change. Do the characters of the story change? Why? How? If they don't change – why is that? Does that make sense? Does the transformation or the way the characters stay the same contribute to the effect of the story?

Description: do the characters come alive for us? Are there enough sensory details to allow us to be "in" the story with them? Do the characters hear, see, smell, feel and taste things?

Antagonists and villains: are they real people, too? If they are not real people in that way, is there a reason for that? Does the way the antagonists and villains are made up contribute to the effect of the story?

Minor characters: are the minor characters real people in that sense? Do we care about them?

Do we **like** the characters and the way they are presented? Do we identify with them? Why?

8. **Dialogue.**
Does what the characters say and how they say it fit them? Does it fit their time and place?

Does the dialogue feel "**real**"?

When does dialogue feel "real"? - If we read parts of the dialogue aloud, does it feel as if real people in this situation would speak that way?

If it does not feel "real", is there a reason for that? Does it make sense? Does it contribute to the effect of the story?

Does the way the characters speak change depending on with whom they are talking? Real people talk in a different manner to different people: real people will not talk to their boss in the same way as they talk to a child.

Does the dialogue resemble our normal **way of talking** too much? Not enough? Why? Is there anything distracting or annoying about the dialogue? Does the author use slang? Dialect? If the author uses either, is it easy to read? Does it contribute to the effect of the story?

Does the dialogue characterize the speaker appropriately? Has every character a **distinctive "voice"**? Does every character have his or her own way of speaking, their own rhythm of speech, their preferred length of sentences, a certain vocabulary or accent?

Are there long monologues or long conversations? Do they make sense? Do they contribute to the effect of the story?

Are there too many **speech tags**? Are there annoying or distracting speech tags?

Is there not **enough dialogue**? Is there too much dialogue? Why?

9. **Point of View.**
Which Point of View is used in the story? Does the chosen POV contribute to the effect of the story? How?

Is there **one POV or many**? Does the POV **change** frequently? Does the way the POVs are handled make sense? Does it contribute to the effect of the story?

Is the POV used consistently?

Are there POV mistakes? Examples: jumping from one POV to another within one scene, getting "into" a character's head although the POV is limited to another character.

If there are POV changes, do we always know whose POV is the relevant POV in each given scene? If not, is there a reason for it? Does it contribute to the effect of the story?

Presentation of POV: are there "leading" adverbs? Information dumps? Author intrusive

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summaries to tell the reader how to interpret a scene? Or is the story allowed to stand on its own?

10. **Style.**
   Does the story have a **distinctive style**? How can we characterize that style? Does it contribute to the effect of the story?

   "Style" is a term with many meanings. It is "a distinctive manner of expression", but also "a distinctive quality, form, or type of something" and "a convention with respect to spelling, punctuation, capitalization, and typographic arrangement and display followed in writing or printing". When we look at the style of a story, we look at many different aspects of how that story is written. Indeed, anything we notice that does not really fit into any other category can make sense as an aspect of "style":

   "Show, don't tell!" -- This rule is a cliché. But: how much of the story is "show", how much is "tell"? Do the passages of "show" and the passages of "tell" make sense? Do they contribute to the effect of the story? How? Are there passages with too much abstract language? Are there passages with too much detail?

   Is there room for our interpretation of the story or do we get told what we are supposed to think?

   Wordiness: is the style of the story precise, concise, vivid, descriptive? Are there too many words like "very", "much", "really", "great"? Do we miss more details or more colour? Do we feel close to the story? Or is there a lot of passive voice or past tense that keeps the reader at a distance? If there is, does it make sense? Does it contribute to the effect of the story or distract us?

   Are there unnecessary words, like "and", "by", "of", too many adjectives or adverbs, unnecessary qualifiers like "almost", "maybe" or "seem", many "could" forms? Are there repetitions? Does the effect of the repetition contribute or distract from the story? Are there redundant phrases, two sentences saying essentially the same?

   Accuracy and consistency: is the narrative accurate and consistent in all or most aspects throughout the story?

   Is there anything that distracts from the story?

   Way of writing and figures of speech: are there many clichés in the story? If there are clichés, do they bother us or do we only notice them if we are looking for them? Are there over-original phrases? Mixed metaphors? "Purple prose" - language that is very flowery and ornate? Does the author force her style? Does the style read natural? Why?

11. **Formatting.**
   Is the story easy to read?

   Does the way the paragraphs are separated make sense?

   If the formatting is in any way unusual, does the effect contribute to the effect of the

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story, does it make sense? Or does it appear to be completely random?

If the story is intended to be read on a computer screen it is appropriate to format it differently than for offline reading. We should also keep in mind that customs of formatting may vary from country to country, and that online formatting is also a question of computer skills. Therefore we should be careful with how much importance we put in formatting as a sign for story quality.

12. **Grammar and Spelling.**
    Generally we should be careful with detailed nitpicking for grammar and spelling if the author has not asked for it. A list of typos is not a review.

    It is appropriate to comment on recurring and major errors. However, we should be careful to check that our perception of the correct spelling and of what is grammatically correct is backed up by other sources.

3.3 Fan fiction

The aspects we discussed so far are important for critiquing any kind of story. They are also the considerations that are most important for critiquing fan fiction stories. Apart from these general considerations there are, however, certain aspects that are important for critiquing different genres of literature, such as romance novels, Science Fiction, fantasy or, in our case, fan fiction.

In the following I will attempt to indicate a few factors that can be relevant for critiquing fan fiction stories. I am aware that the importance of every single one of these aspects can be argued and I do not claim that this list is in any way complete. Just as the outline of the general considerations, this is meant to be only a guideline with suggestions of what can be important for critiquing Tolkien fan fiction.

- The most important aspect is that we need to keep in mind that it is not the specific sub-genre of Tolkien fan fiction that makes a good story a good Tolkien fan fiction story, or a bad story a bad Tolkien fan fiction story. An Alternative Universe story is not per-se better than a Canon story. Movieverse is not in any way inferior to bookverse. Silmarillion, Hobbit or LOTR, slash or gen, even "Tenth Walker" or "Mary Sue" -- those **labels and sub-genres** are **not** relevant for the quality of the story. Plot, characterization, well-written dialogue, realistic settings and other aspects are much more important.

- **Labels and warnings.** If we critique a fan fiction story, we have to accept the labels and warnings an author has put on the story. If a story is labelled "Alternative Universe" we cannot criticize it for being "Alternative Universe". We can criticize that the plot does not make sense within this story. We can criticize if it has no connection to Tolkien anymore at all. We can criticize if the label or warning does not fit the content of the story. What we *cannot* do is criticize the story for any kind of "canon" violation.

- **Canon.** Actually, there is no "canon". Even for the abstract term of "canon" there are several different definitions in literary theory. Within Tolkien fan fiction there are also several different definitions of canon that are equally valid. One definition includes only what was published during Tolkien's lifetime. Another includes "The Silmarillion". Yet

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another includes those writings in "The History of Middle-earth" or "Unfinished Tales" that are not clearly contradicting what is said in "The Lord of the Rings".

Therefore we should be very careful to use any kind of "canon" to judge the quality of any given fan fiction story.

- **Interpretation.** Fan fiction stories are based on the writers' interpretations of plots and characters of the movies made by Peter Jackson, or of the books written by J.R.R. Tolkien or published by Christopher Tolkien. Every reader's and every writer's interpretation is valid. If our interpretation is different from the one presented in the story we are critiquing, we have to be careful that we do not criticize this interpretation because it is different from our interpretation, or because we believe that it simply does not fit. The interpretation has to fit within this particular story. It does not have to fit our interpretation to be good or bad.

- **Style.** Someone who writes Tolkien fan fiction is *not* Tolkien. Someone who critiques Tolkien fan fiction is *not* Tolkien. We cannot know how Tolkien would have written this particular fan fiction story, or if he would have approved of the way it was written or the style it was written in. Emulating Tolkien's style in prose or dialogue *can* fit a fan fiction story. However, this is often *not* the case. Tolkien's style was *Tolkien's* style, developed in a lifetime of writing, in a lifetime before many of those who write Tolkien fan fiction today were even born. It is a style that does not fit many fan fiction stories, or that can be employed successfully by many fan fiction authors. If a Tolkienesque style fits a story and is kept up consistently throughout the story, this is certainly a mark of quality. If a story does not attempt to emulate Tolkien's style, this is a choice of the author that has to be respected. We cannot criticize this decision or the resulting style as such. The aspects mentioned in the general outline for a critique are much more important to determine the quality of a story's style.

I think it is better to tackle the special fan fiction aspects of a critique only after addressing the aspects of writing that are important for any kind of story. However, it is also possible to include the special dimension of fan fiction in any point of the general outline.

When we do that, we should keep in mind that the fact that a story stays close to Tolkien or Peter Jackson's movies is not a mark of good quality in itself. We should also keep in mind that the fact that a story is contradictory to Tolkien or Peter Jackson's movies is not a mark of bad quality in itself. After all, if we wanted to read Tolkien, we would be reading Tolkien's books and not a fan fiction story, and if we wanted to see Peter Jackson's movies we would do that.

Critiquing a fan fiction story we have to read the story for itself first. Only after we have considered its quality as a story in its own right it makes sense for us to move on and look at the story's relationship to the movies or Tolkien's writings.

The following questions may be useful to ask ourselves when critiquing the special aspects of a fan fiction story, according to the outline for a critique as illustrated above.

1. **Overall Impressions**
   How does this story illuminate and enhance Tolkien's world?

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2. **The Opening**
   How is the fan fiction aspect of this story introduced?

3. **The Plot and the Story Line**
   If it is canon, does it catch our interest? Why? Or why not?

   If it is AU, is the connection to Tolkien interesting? How? If the story is written against Tolkien, does the plot make sense within this story?

4. **The Ending**
   Does the story lead (back) into what Tolkien wrote? How? Does that contribute to the effect of the story? Or does the ending go beyond what Tolkien wrote? How? Does it contribute to the effect of this story?

5. **The Setting**
   Does the setting of the story match what Tolkien wrote? How? If it does not match what Tolkien wrote, why is that? Does it contribute to the effect of the story?

6. **The Use of Conflict**
   Is the conflict of the story the same conflict Tolkien used? Why? Does this contribute to the effect of the story? Is it another kind of conflict than the one Tolkien used? Why? Does this contribute to the effect of the story?

7. **Characterization**
   How are the various persons characterized? Are the characterizations like the ones in the movies? Are they like Tolkien's characterizations? Why? Does this contribute to the effect of the story?

   Do the characters appear different from the movies or something that Tolkien wrote? How? Is there a reason for that difference within the story? Does the characterization fit within the story? Does it contribute to the effect of the story?

8. **Dialogue**
   Does the author try to emulate Tolkien's style of dialogue? If she does, is that style correctly and consistently used? Does every person speak the way you would expect them to speak in Tolkien's style? Does using this style contribute to the effect of the story?

   If the style of Tolkien's dialogue is not used, we have to accept that choice. We have to accept the style of the author. In this case we can treat the dialogue in the story just like we would examine the dialogue in any other story.

   Does the author use words from foreign languages, especially the Elvish languages or the Rohirric tongue? If yes, are the words easy to identify within the story, for example by the use of italics? Is the use correct? Does the use of those words make sense? Do the right people speak the relevant language? Are there translations, are the sources for the languages cited? Does the effect of using those words/languages contribute to the effect of the story?

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9. **Point of View**
   Is the choice of the point of view unusual for a Tolkien fan fiction story? Why? Does this contribute to the effect of the story?

10. **Style**
    Does the style of the story emulate Tolkien's style? Is the style consistent and correct? Does this style contribute to the effect of the story?

    If the style does not emulate Tolkien's style, we have to accept that. It is not appropriate to criticize the style of writing in any way because it is different from Tolkien's style. We have to accept the style of the author. In this case we can treat the style of the story just like we would examine the style of any other story. What kind of style is used in the story? Does it fit the story? Does it contribute to the effect of the story?

Again, we have to keep in mind that while a *good* fan fiction story illuminates and enhances the original story, we need to respect the choice of the author about how close she stays to the source material and how she chooses to interpret it. Even an interpretation that is "wrong" in our personal opinion is a *valid* interpretation. "Bad" interpretations are interpretations that do not make sense within that particular story, that are not consistent or that have no connection to the source material anymore at all for no apparent reason.

3.4 A short critique

Often we may not have the time to write an extensive critique like that, or it may not be appropriate, because the author has not asked for such detailed critical feedback. Especially if we critique a single chapter of a multi-chapter story, only a few of the aspects mentioned above will be relevant. But even if we cannot write a detailed critique for whatever reason, we may find ourselves in a situation where we may want to leave a helpful comment nevertheless, a review that shows we have really read the story and that we really appreciate the author's effort. We want to leave a review that goes beyond overused phrases such as "Ohhh, I love it!" or a list of typos or missing words.

For a short critique, the following approach may be useful for writing a **short, but well-balanced critique**:

- We begin our comment with a **short summary of the story,** or, if we review a single chapter of a long story, with what we perceived as the **point of the chapter.** Just two or three sentences. This will show the author if the point she was trying to make came across. This will also put us and the author on even footing – both of us will know on which understanding of the story the following critique is based. We have to remember, the author has no telepathic powers as a rule – she won't know how the story came across for us.

- Then we move on to the review. In a short critique, we will write only about those aspects of the story that we noticed most of all, the aspects we enjoyed most of all and the aspects which bothered us most of all.

  Even in a short review, we can use the "sandwich technique" and frame the negative content of your critique with positive impressions. This may be a detail of a description,

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or what this chapter tells us about a certain character...

> We always **start with positive impressions** in order to get the author's friendly attention and to show that we appreciate the effort that went into writing this story.

- Only *after* we have highlighted some positive aspects we move on to **criticizing** it. In a short review we will probably mention only two to four aspects of the story that we think could still be improved on. Now we can tell the author which aspects of the story were not effective in our opinion and why we feel that way. If we review a single chapter of a long story, it is especially important that we analyse how this chapter, its plot and characterizations fit in with the story as a whole.

  Even in a short critique it makes sense to quote the passage of the story that did not work for us. We should also take care to make clear **why** xyz was not effective in **our opinion.** Example: "In my opinion the passage (...) was not effective, because (...)."

- Each aspect we criticized should be connected with a **suggestion for an improvement.** It is not a good idea to format criticism and suggestions as two separate lists. Especially in a short critique this leaves the impression of a very harsh, uncaring review.

  At this point we should also keep in mind the *meaning of suggestion*: to suggest means "to mention or imply as a possibility, to offer for consideration". We should never give orders or act as if we were some kind of "fiction police". Our suggestions should be concrete and if possible we should use examples to illustrate them. Example: "I believe that the passage (...) could be more effective if you (...), because this (...). For example (...)"

- The critique should **end on a constructive, upbeat note** to balance the negative content. For example, we could quote our favourite line or give an example of what we enjoyed about the story or chapter, or relate an instant reaction to the story or chapter (an exclamation, a smile...).

- Last but not least, we should not forget **friendly greeting at the very end.** After all, we want our comment to be heard and understood by the author. If we are friendly and polite in our critique, the author will be more likely to think about the negative criticism in that critique.

This short critique will be seven to twelve sentences long and take us about fifteen minutes to write. But it will be a real review, even if it is short, and not just a comment.

3.5 Summary

To recapitulate:

- We need to phrase our critique thoughtfully and politely. Just like a story, a critique should also be well written with regard to style and grammar.

- We need to structure our critique clearly so that it is easy to understand!

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A *possible* structure/outline for a long, thorough critique *may* be the following check-list.

1. **Overall Impressions**
2. **The Opening**
3. **The Plot and the Story Line**
4. **The Ending**
5. **The Setting**
6. **The Use of Conflict**
7. **Characterization**
8. **Dialogue**
9. **Point of View**
10. **Style**
11. **Formatting**
12. **Grammar and Spelling**
13. **Fan fiction**

If we critique a *long* story it is really very useful to follow a check-list like the one suggested in this article. If we review only a single chapter of a long story, we will usually write only a short review with a special emphasis on how this chapter relates to the story as a whole.

No matter which kind of story we critique, we have to keep in mind that not every item on that check-list will be important for every story, and that there may be stories for which other aspects than the ones mentioned in this essay may be essential for a good, thorough critique.

In time, every one of us will probably make up our very own "*check list*" for writing a thorough review of a story.

- We need to format our critique!

If we do write a thorough review using any check-list, we might want to use the various items on our check-list as subtitles for the various paragraphs of our critique. This will make it easier for the author to understand what we are talking about.

It is especially useful if we quote the crucial passages of the story that we refer to, so that the author will know at once just what we are talking about.

Just like a story, a critique has to be nicely formatted so that it can be easily read and understood!

If all of that has been kept in mind, then the reviewer has certainly done a good job!

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4. The Author's Job
4.1 The Author

Now that the critiquer has done her job, let's have a look at what the author should do with the critique.

The author's job in the critiquing process is difficult, too.

We want to improve our writing. For that we need feedback. And sadly, what we need most of all is feedback with a negative critical content. Before we can improve, all the flaws in our writing have to be exposed.

First of all, we need to remember that critiquing is about our writing. It is *not* about us as a person. It is *always and only* about our writing. As soon as a comment is no longer a comment about the story, but a comment about us, it ceases to be a critique and becomes a "*flame*". But of course even a friendly, polite, thorough, detailed and tough critique may hurt and sting, and our first impulse may be to react defensively. This feeling is natural: it's our "*baby*", that gets "attacked" here after all!

If we feel threatened and hurt by a thorough review at the first reading, it is a good a idea to let it "sit" for a day or two. When we read the review again, we already know what to expect, that it is not all praise for our story and our talent. Then we can read it again with an open mind.

Even if a critique seems very negative, that's no reason to give up writing. It may be impossible to "learn" the genius of a Pulitzer Prize or Nobel Prize winner, but there are a lot of things that anyone can learn about writing. And a detailed, negative critique is the best help for learning things about good writing we can possibly get. However, we also don't have to assume that the critiquer is automatically right with everything she says.

Just as we are not perfect as authors, our critiquers are not perfect critiquers.

I said at the beginning that critiquing should be regarded as a game that we play in a team against the story. If that is true, and we "get passed the ball" with the critique, then after reading the review and thinking about it, it's our turn to throw the ball back.

We should **reply** to our reviewers and critiquers if that is at all possible.

- We should let them know that we received the critique and that we appreciate it. Every critiquer wants to know if the effort they put in their comments was wasted or useful. And critiquers and beta-readers need *critique,* too, to improve their skills of giving good, constructive feedback.

- Therefore we should tell our critiquers how they have influenced our writing.

  If we agree with some of the points they raised, we should tell them. If we did not understand a part of their critique, we should quote that passage of the critique and explain to them why we did not understand that and ask them to clarify. It is also a good idea to *ask* the reviewers *why* something irritated or bothered them, if we are surprised

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by them.

- If we know that an aspect of the critique we received is not correct, we are allowed to politely tell the critiquer why we believe that she is wrong on that account. We *may* disagree with our critiquers, and we *may* tell them that we disagree.

However, just like in a critique, we should do this <u>politely</u> and we should always give <u>reasons</u> for our <u>opinion</u>. We need to remember that even though this is our story and we think that of course we know best what is good for it, there are only very few (if any) ultimate truths about writing.

We also have to remember that no one is forcing us to take up every little bit of criticism. Just because certain aspects of our story were criticized does not necessarily mean that they are wrong, or that they should be changed. It only means that it is *possible* that the story would improve if we revise those aspects. We need to remember that no matter of how closely we work with our beta-reader and how much getting detailed, critical feedback from our reviewers means to us, it still remains our story.

In the end we should only make those changes that feel right to us.

4.2 Communication!

At the end of this essay I would like to draw your attention on a facet of the process of critiquing and reviewing that is overlooked a lot of the time.

Critiquing is about communication.

Communication!

We should always remember that critiquing is about communicating.

Successful communication needs both partners to be willing to communicate. Successful communication requires effort, openness and understanding – for both partners!

Effort. If we want a critiquing process to be successful for both partners, we need to be willing to spend time on it. We need time to read a story carefully. We need time for writing a thoughtful review. We need time to reply to revise our story. We need time to reply to the critiquer. We need time to reply to the author. If we are not willing to invest that time, it might be better not to review.

Openness. A critique will be more helpful if the author knows who we are and if she has a way to get back to us if she did not understand an aspect of our critique. After writing a careful, thorough critique we tend to think that everything we said is crystal clear – but experience and Murphy's Law tell us that most of the time this is not the case.

A successful critique requires openness by the author *and* the critiquer.

Respect. We have to respect the author of the story we are reading, in real life and in the realm of fan fiction.

If the author of a fan fiction story does not care to write what we happen to consider a "good" story, we have to respect that choice. If an author wants to write <u>and</u> post her stories *just for fun* with no consideration for the rules of spelling or grammar or for what Tolkien wrote originally, if an author does *not* want to improve her writing, **we have to respect that choice.**

We want to write the best stories we possibly can, and we want critical, constructive feedback that helps us to improve our stories. If we want respect for our choices about the way we write and publish our stories, we have to respect the choices of other authors about writing and publishing their stories as well.

Often it is a simple matter of using "common sense" to decide if an author really wants "concrit", constructive critical feedback or not. For example "Plz review!" usually only means, "Leave a comment if you liked the story." If you are not sure if the author wants a real critique and you really want to give some good, tough feedback, leave a comment or mail the author and ask!

If we critique a story because we have to decide if it is to be included in an archive or if it is good enough for an award, it is still communication that should be conducted in a polite, friendly and thoughtful manner. If our critique is sent to the author directly, it is meant for the author. We should be aware that we are, in fact, addressing the author in our critique even if she has no means to reply to us. Therefore we should be just as careful about how we phrase and structure our critique as in those cases where we want or expect the author to reply to our reviews.

Even if we write our critique for an audience beyond the author, we should make an effort to write a thoughtful, polite and well-balanced review. A review that is not balanced is simply bad. A review that is not polite is not witty, but only shows that the critiquer has no manners.

Again: critiquing is about communication.

A successful critique is a friendly dialogue between author and critiquer. That way it can turn into a positive learning experience for both the author and the reviewer.

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5. P.S.: A Quick Constructive Review

I think one of the biggest problems of reviewing is time. Often, no, most of the time, I simply have not enough time to come up with a thorough, constructive critique for a story. I'm sure many of you are familiar with the desire to get a 36 hours day...

So there we sit, stare at a story we just read, and we would really like to give some good, solid concrit. And already we feel guilty, because we don't have the time to write the critique we feel the story deserves.

There's nothing wrong with that!

Everyone is busy. All of us have offline lives. Many reviewers are also authors with the next story already clamouring for attention. I think no author *expects* really long, detailed critiques. But I also believe that most authors *hope* for a comment. And most authors probably *dream* of reading more than "I liked that, please update soon".

Therefore I believe that a *short* review is better than no review at all!

Apart from those practical considerations, a review also has to *fit* the story it is written for:

For a really short piece of writing (a drabble, or a short short), or for the review of a single chapter of a multi-chapter story, it simply doesn't make sense to try and take into account every aspect I outlined in chapter 3.

I believe what we need is a way to write a short, but constructive and balanced critique that fits the reviewing needs of drabbles, chapters or short shorts and matches what little time for reviewing we have.

But how?

When I wrote my loooong essay I thought about that, too. I even found one idea for writing short reviews online and included that approach in chapter 3.

After I posted the essay, I was asked by many readers who found that essay helpful to post this "recipe for a short review" separately for easy reference.

So here it is: my "recipe" for a quick, constructive review.

Please remember that this is only *one* possible way of writing a short, constructive and balanced review. There are many other approaches that are just as "right" or "wrong" like this. Just like with writing a story, there are no "ultimate truths" or "indisputable laws" for reviewing.

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A possible "recipe" for a quick, constructive review:

1. We begin our comment with a **short summary** of the story, or, if we review a single chapter of a long story, with what we perceived as the point of this chapter.

   Just two or three sentences.

   This will show the author if the point she or he was trying to make came across. This will also put us and the author on even footing – both of us will know on which understanding of the story or chapter the following critique is based. We have to remember, the author has no telepathic powers as a rule – she or he won't know how the story came across for us if we don't tell them.

2. Then we move on to the review.

   In a short critique, we will write only about those aspects of the story that we noticed most of all: the aspects we enjoyed most of all and the aspects which bothered us most of all. Maybe only one aspect, or two or three, rarely more.

   But even in a short review, we can use the **"sandwich technique"** and frame the negative content of your critique with positive impressions. This may be a detail of a description, or what this chapter tells us about a certain character...

   It is a good idea always to start with **positive impressions,** in order to get the author's friendly attention and to show that we appreciate the effort that went into writing this story.

3. Only after we have highlighted some positive aspects we move on to **criticizing** it.

   In a short review we will probably mention only two to three aspects of the story that in our opinion still could be improved on.

   At this point in the critique, we tell the author which aspects of the story were not effective for us and especially *why* we feel that way.

   If we review a single chapter of a long story, it is very important that we analyse how this chapter, its plot and characterizations fit in with the story as a whole. What does the chapter contribute to the story?

   Even in a short critique it makes sense to quote the passage of the story that did not work for us. We should also take care to make clear *why* xyz was not effective in our opinion. For example we could say: *"In my opinion the passage (...) was not effective, because (...)."*

4. Each aspect we criticized should be connected with a **concrete suggestion for an improvement.**

   It is not a good idea to format criticism and suggestions as two separate lists. Especially in a short critique this leaves the impression of a very harsh, uncaring review.

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Concerning this aspect of a critique, we should keep in mind the meaning of suggestion: to suggest means "to mention or imply as a possibility, to offer for consideration". We should never give orders or act as if we are some kind of "fiction police".

Our suggestions should also be concrete, and if possible, we should use examples to illustrate them.

For example we could say: *"I believe that the passage (...) could be more effective if you do (...) instead of (...), because this (...). For example (...)"*

5. The critique should **end on a constructive, upbeat note** to balance its negative content.

   For example, we could quote our favourite line or give an example of what we enjoyed about the story or chapter, or relate an instant reaction to the story or chapter (an exclamation, a smile...).

   If we can say clearly what we like and why, that will help the author just as much to improve as our negative criticism. Improving means to keep doing what was good, and to work on what was not yet as effective as it could have been. To be able to do that, the author also needs to know what was good and effective about her story in the first place.

6. Last but not least, we should not forget **friendly greeting at the very end** and make sure that the author has a way to contact us if she wishes to.

   After all, we want our comment to be heard and understood by the author. If we are friendly and polite in our critique, the author will be more likely to think about the negative criticism in that critique.

   This short critique will be **about twelve sentences** long and take us maybe fifteen minutes to write.

   But it will be a real, constructive and helpful review, even if it is short, and not just a comment.

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Resources for Reviewing and Revising
Online

- ["How to Critique Fiction" by Victory Crayne](#)
- ["How to do a short critique", approach of Maureen F. McHugh](#)
- ["The Diplomatic Critiquer" by Alan Burt](#)

Offline

- Browne, Renni and King, Dave. Self-Editing for Fiction Writers: How to Edit Yourself into Print. New York: HarperPerennial, 1994.
- Cheney, Theodore A. Rees. Getting the Words Right: How to Rewrite, Edit & Revise. Cincinnati. Writer's Digest Books, 2005.
- Kaplan, David Michael. Revision: a Creative Approach to Writing and Rewriting Fiction. Cincinnati: Writer's Digest Books, 1997.
- Leland, Christopher T. The Creative Writer's Style Guide. Writer's Digest Books, Cincinnati, 2002.
- Madden, David. Revising Fiction: A Handbook for Writers. New York. Plume, 1988.
- Nickell, Kelly (Ed.). The Writer's Digest Writing Clinic. Writer's Digest Books, Cincinnati, 2003.
- Seidman, Michael. The Complete Guide to Editing Your Fiction. Writer's Digest Books, Cincinnati, 2000.

Author's Notes

This essay was originally written as background material for a critiquing exercise in a writers' workshop for Tolkien fan fiction.

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About the Author

JunoMagic - who is JunoMagic? And why JunoMagic?

Juno - that penname was graciously granted by one of the author's cats. *Magic* - although the author does believe in magic, especially in the magic woven with words and songs and stories, the magical part of the penname derives simply from her e-mail address.

Speaking of that e-mail address: the author can be contacted at "Juno_Magic *at* magic *dot* ms".

If there are any comments or questions, please drop a line! In a letter to the editor of the 'Observer' Tolkien wrote *"I am as susceptible as a dragon to flattery"*. The same can probably be said for most writers! JunoMagic at least thoroughly enjoys answering questions about her writing and constructive criticism aka "concrit" are vital for any author wishing to improve, so that is always welcome, too!

"The Lord of the Rings" has been in Juno 's life since she was five years old and her mother grew bored with what was regarded as "appropriate bed time tales". Twenty-four years later Juno discovered "online fan fiction" and was immediately fascinated.

More information about Juno's stories and the author herself may be found at her website: "Juno's Magic" and at her LiveJournal: "Juno's Magic: To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield." (quote from Alfred Lord Tennyson).

When she is not JunoMagic, the author is at home in a small Franconian village with her husband and two cats. She has a professional qualification in law, a bachelor degree in political sciences and history and is currently working as a freelance writer.

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