

## Critiques: Giving and Getting Input

*Creativity is more than just being different. Anybody can be plain weird; that's easy. What's hard is to be as simple as Bach. Making the simple, awesomely simple, that's creativity.*

Charles Mingus

During a critique, the class discusses the projects presented and considers alternative solutions. When the discussion is substantial and supportive, everyone leaves with greater insight into the strengths and weaknesses of each artwork, and with a deeper understanding of the ideas behind the assignment. When the discussion is trivial or mean-spirited, motivation decreases, boredom increases, and the whole class suffers.

In general, critiques are most productive when

- The projects under discussion are well-developed and varied.
- The discussion is focused and purposeful.
- The opinions expressed are strongly based on the evidence presented.
- Recommendations for improvement are specific and supportive.
- Everyone contributes.

Personal responsibility is the key. Whether discussing a work in progress or a final project, the more you contribute, the more you will gain. Developing a solid understanding of the basic elements and principles of design is an essential first step. Line, shape, texture, value, and color are widely considered the most basic elements of two-dimensional design, whereas line, plane, space, texture, volume, and mass are often listed as the basic elements of three-dimensional design. The illusion of space and use of shading are especially

important aspects of drawing. Most professors will list unity and variety, emphasis and focal point, scale and proportion, balance, and rhythm as the essential principles of design.

If you are unfamiliar with this information, read a basic design textbook—several good options are listed in the Recommend Readings at the end of this book. You can then use your design vocabulary to back up each of your comments with specific examples. Rather than just saying, “Amy’s composition looks great,” you can say, “The use of diagonal lines and the illusion of space add energy to Amy’s composition.” By connecting a specific strategy (such as the use of diagonal lines) to a desired result (such as increasing compositional energy), you add weight to your words.

### CONTRIBUTING TO A CRITIQUE

Before the critique even begins, look carefully at all the works presented. Select the three projects that seem to fulfill the assignment most effectively and note the specific strategies used. For example:



Amy's design



Antonio's design

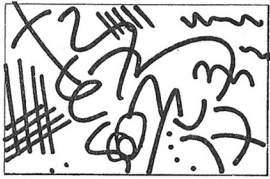


Suh-Yi's design

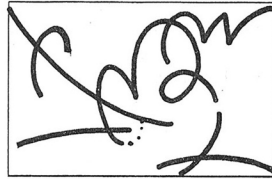
- Amy's design has the most energy. She used jagged, diagonal lines and varied the weight of her lines. Lines intersect with the edge of paper and thus seem to explode right off the page.
- Antonio's design has greatest illusion of space. He put largest shapes in front, smallest in back, used overlap, and softened focus on background shapes. Central shapes seem to rotate, increasing compo energy.
- Suh-Yi's design uses focal point to increase unity. As a result, she was able to use nine different kinds of line effectively.

Then, select one of the less effective projects and consider strategies for improvement. Suggesting alternatives or ways to expand on existing strengths is more effective than bluntly telling another student what he or she “should do.” For example:

- Angel's design seems confused—lots of lines going in all directions.
- Try using a focal point or dominant direction to strengthen organization.
- Consider organizing the different types of lines into three separate layers, with the diagonals in red, horizontals in gray, and verticals in black.
- See what happens when your design is distilled down to just six lines.



Angel's initial design



Distilled design

Then, just wait for the professor to set the critique in motion. There are many possible approaches to critiques, so remain attentive and be supportive, no matter what. Listen to discussion of the works of others as carefully as you listen to the discussion of your own artwork. By looking carefully at all of the work and by jotting down some notes, you will be better prepared to contribute.

## GAINING FROM A CRITIQUE

A substantial critique can be mentally and emotionally exhausting. Many different solutions may be presented, and you may get a lot of contradictory advice. In some cases, you will be asked to re-work your project after the critique. The following lists can help you determine additional actions to take.

### Responding to a Recent Critique in a Drawing Class

Based on the critique of your work *and* the works of others, note the following:

Three ways to strengthen the idea:

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Three ways to strengthen the composition:

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Technical improvements needed:

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Additional notes:

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### Responding to a Recent Critique in a Design Class

What is the strongest aspect of the design? \_\_\_\_\_  
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What is the weakest aspect of the design? \_\_\_\_\_  
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Should anything be added or expanded? \_\_\_\_\_  
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Should anything be deleted? \_\_\_\_\_  
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Should anything be repeated? \_\_\_\_\_  
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How can the project be strengthened conceptually? \_\_\_\_\_  
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How can the project be strengthened technically? \_\_\_\_\_  
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