

Constructive Criticism: That which does not kill us....

Somewhere in the back of all our minds there's a little list titled "Things People Need to Know That Will Probably Hurt to Hear." Like "I can see your undies through your yoga pants." Or "Your sister didn't call back because she's in bed with your husband." Somewhere between those two extremes is "Your writing kinda sucks."

It hurts. Because we're writers, we know exactly how and where it hurts. Because we're human, we're hardwired not to cause pain when we don't have to. But unless we know what's wrong with our writing, we will never become better writers.

So how do you walk the line between hurting someone unnecessarily and helping them improve? This line is the "constructive" part of constructive criticism. It's where I try to be every week as I moderate the challenge grid submissions here at yeah write. I like to think I do OK; or at least, I'm good enough at it that I was asked to share my not-a-secret rules for how to do it.

Rowan's Rules of Order:

- 1) **Identify what you don't like.** It's not enough to say "I kinda hate this." Figure out what rubs you wrong. Is it the spelling? Do you just hate the story? Are you having a hard time caring? Remember that for nonfiction and essays, the *writing* isn't inherently bad just because you disagree with the author's *conclusion*. It's bad if there's no support for that conclusion, if you can't see how the author reached it, even if you disagree with some of the premises.
- 2) **Identify what's working.** This might be as small a thing as word choice or as large as an essay that made you seriously reconsider how much you're drinking.
- 3) **Learn to describe 1 and 2.** "This sucks" and "this is great" are both utterly useless as feedback. You need to use your skills as a writer and communicate what you did and didn't like about the work.
- 4) **Start with the good stuff.** Always tell people what's working for them before you describe what needs fine tuning. ALWAYS. Do not let me catch you being mean before you're nice. Mary Poppins pointed out that a spoonful of sugar makes the medicine go down, and this is your spoonful of sugar.
- 5) **Now explain what's not working.** Is it too long? Did you get lost in the middle? Did you have to guess who Tom was? This is the time to tell the writer what needs fixing. This is also the time to get into the gory details. Punctuation? Spelling? How you tackle this part depends on your personal style. You can go through the piece with a fine-toothed comb and mark everything, or you can make general comments and depend on the author to learn how to fix the issues you identify. Unless a piece is in the final draft stage I tend to favor the latter approach, because it helps the author learn what to do for next time, not just blindly follow my direction.
- 6) **Wrap up with some overall comments.** This is the time to tell the writer how the piece made you feel, what you connected with, what concerns you have or what you think you understood but aren't sure. And now say something good (but honest! always be honest! honest is not the

same as mean!), because the writer has shared something very personal with you and trusted you to treat it kindly. Have you been kind?

But... what does this all look like, for real?

The following is a critique of a piece I wrote when I was awfully young, and a redraft following the criticism. This is what I expect you to deliver if I ask you to read my work and give me honest criticism. Note that I have delivered specific comments within the body of the piece, and a general critique at the end – the general statements would be in an email, if I were writing an email to Baby Rowan.

Voilara

By Rowan, Age 9

It had rained during the night. An occasional translucent drop graced the stones or splashed softly down from the heavy-laden limbs of sparse, twisted trees as Voilara picked her slow way across the native stone of Gilat market. It had rained that other night....

Voilara's thoughts were drawn irrevocably back in time, to when she was fifteen, although only a week had passed since her birthday, which was a joyous occasion and followed by much feasting.

Then, that night, under cover of clouded night, the invaders, traitors all to the true King, crept over the walls on knotted silken ropes. Even before her father could reach for his sword, a curving silver saber had slid through his heart, killing him even before the murderer could withdraw it. Laughing with fiendish delight, the second man in the cruel band turned to Voilara's mother, yanking her roughly by the arm, pulling her up one... two.. three... four...five stories, and hurling her from the latticed window. Voilara preferred not even to think of how her brother, five years her senior, was killed.

The group of murderers had let her live... as a peasant, while they were Kings!

The basket, weighed down with fruit, began to tilt, and reaching up, she straightened it. Keeping one hand on her basket, when slowly crossed the market. She would have vengeance... and her crown... soon.....

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Young Rowan:

You have done some great scene setting and really laid the opening groundwork for the central conflict in this story, Voilara vs the usurpers. All of your word choice and description help to set up a kingdom in a desert, down to the rain being infrequent enough to remind your main character of specific events.

One weakness you have is that you use far more adjectives than are called for. Using fewer descriptors and breaking your writing into shorter sentences will help keep your point clear and your story flowing.

You also skip some points that may be important for reader understanding, like why the murderers would let Voilara live after killing her entire family. I don't know if you intend to answer those questions later, but if you plan for this story to be a standalone you should consider fleshing it out in that regard.

Overall I liked your plot arc, which sets the scene, describes a clear flashback, and then pulls the reader back to the present with a promise of more to come.

Old Rowan

Commented [M1]: Is this already an implicit quality of water?

Commented [M2]: Consider using fewer adjectives in this sentence in favor of using nouns with flavor (i.e. granite or marble rather than native stone).

Commented [M3]: I love your naming scheme- the words are internally consistent and it gives us a sense of where we are in the world without having to describe it too much.

Commented [M4]: This whole paragraph is one sentence and could probably be broken up. Giving us a little more here about her birthday would help set the tone for the heartbreak later and give this piece some needed length.

Commented [M5]: Word repetition; find a synonym for "night" or consider deleting the subordinate clause entirely.

Commented [M6]: Repetition again; you used this phrase to begin the sentence.

Commented [M7]: Unclear- did he walk her up the stairs? You don't need to spell it out, just clarify what's going on.

Commented [M8]: No capital necessary.

Commented [M9]: typo? I think you mean "she" or "Voilara"

Commented [M10]: Consider using punctuation that is not an ellipsis.

Voilara

Last night's rain had washed the Gilat market clean. Only a few drops still clung to the dying trees that surrounded the square as Voilara picked her way toward her stall, balancing her basket. Even the smell of rain on sandstone was enough to force her memories back.

Her fifteenth birthday had been a cause for rejoicing; a Princess' coming-of-age. Flowers hung in the market then, and more garlands adorned the minarets of the palace. Even the latticed windows seemed to cast more festive shadows than usual. From the highest tower to the meanest hut there had been feasting and revelry, and musicians had played late into the night.

If only they had played the night through, Voilara thought, we might have still been awake.

With grappling hooks and silk ropes the traitors had crept over the palace walls to find the royal family asleep in their beds. Before King Aharzah could reach for his sword, his life's blood already stained the floor. His wife's screams echoed as she fell from the bedroom window to the marble courtyard five stories below. Voilara never knew what happened to her brothers. She herself had slipped out of the side gate in the commotion, one servant among many fleeing the palace.

Yes, she had lived- but as a peasant, while the bastards who murdered her family lived as kings.

As Voilara stared up at the palace, her basket began to slip and tilt. Reaching up with one hand, she straightened it in a gesture that ten years had made a habit. Keeping her hand on the basket she crossed the market to her stall. The minarets mocked her in the early sunshine.

She comforted herself as she laid out her burden of fruit with the knowledge that she would have vengeance – and her crown – soon.